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Editor's Notebook

WOULD SOMEONE CARE TO SAY WHAT IS GOING ON HERE?

Film Quarterly is a critical journal, and our major interests are in the durable issues of film aesthetics, history, and theory. But no art exists in isolation from its commercial substructure, and drastic changes have been taking place in the film industry. Film scholars go on teaching about the classics of the past, and remaining on the lookout for a few serious works from the present; but meanwhile is the industry disintegrating under our feet? Are we about to witness the end of an art form—with television and other video forms doing in film rather as film did in the mass-audience theater of the nineteenth century?

Drastic questions, but perhaps not so drastic considering how the number of theatrical films produced in Hollywood has declined; or considering how the industry emphasis has moved toward youth-oriented would-be blockbusters. (Scripts with adult audience prospects have a difficult time getting into production tracks these days—though if they reach theaters they can surprise everybody by doing very well: *Four Seasons, Kramer vs. Kramer, Terms of Endearment.*) A high and increasing proportion of Hollywood's talent pool is engaged in work for television; and while TV may occasionally undertake, in a carefully neutral way, some theme that seems too specialized or too sensitive for theatrical film, the name of the small-screen game is still talking heads and video flash, and it is not comforting to think of talented directors being able to work in no other medium. Many interesting theatrical films that do get produced are savaged by the marketers: some are shelved entirely unless dedicated directors save them (*Stunt Man*), others receive aborted runs or are exhibited only in a few metropolitan centers: in short, the

(continued on p. 63)

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real at the end of her quest, will eventually be fatal for her. It is Baptiste's ability to "roll with the punches" which will perhaps save her, but at what cost? As one of the Maxes puts her through a karate exercise and tells her to fend off "imaginary enemies," the cross-hairs of a surveillance device (a rifle scope? a camera?) appear on the screen. "They" are now being watched by others, perhaps simply by us. That is, it may be that the answer to the riddle of the labyrinth—its last door—is simply the screen on which the actors' shadows appear. As for Marie, Baptiste, Julien, and even Max, they are inevitably and forever trapped in the web which Jacques Rivette has woven for them and which he calls *Pont du Nord.*

—FABRICE ZIOLKOWSKI

PONT DU NORD

Books

Torrence, Bruce T. *Hollywood: The First Hundred Years.* New York: New York Zoetrope, 1982. $15.95, paper. This volume was originally published by the Hollywood Chamber of Commerce, and its civic roots are evident—it treats Hollywood as a small town that acquired a famous and glamorous business, rather than a synonym for the American film industry. Filled with photographs of firestations and studios, churches and movie premieres, the book suggests Hollywood's blend of the ordinary and the fantastical. The book's design, however, hampers the reader's enjoyment of the photos. Too often, several pages separate the pictures from their explication in the text, so the reader must keep flipping through pages to recall a photo as it is described. Otherwise, the book offers a unique and enjoyable perspective on its fabled subject.

—VIVIAN KOENIG

STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT AND CIRCULATION, 10/1/83

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C. Total paid circulation	6140	6097
D. Free distribution	122	124
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F. Copies not distributed	1053	1017
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Cynthia Deno, Journals Manager

Editor's Notebook, continued

kind of distribution pattern we associate with the stage drama, but not with a supposed mass medium. Moreover, the wave of ambitious documentaries which arrived in the past few years—many of them financed in part by public funds—seems to be over, a victim of Reagan-era parsimony toward the arts. Even the perennial experimental or "underground" film, which has traditionally survived on virtually nothing, seems to be in trouble: its audiences at colleges and museums have diminished and tastes have moved toward story films of a New Wave sort.

In Britain, where cinema attendance has plummetted and viodeocassette viewing has skyrocketed (thanks in part to a major cassette-piracy industry) a vivid sense of crisis exists, and new policy proposals are being made to sustain the domestic producing industry. In the US, it is tempting to hope that we are facing simply temporary signs of cultural reaction and stagnation. But it seems likely that fundamental structural changes are taking place which mean the seventh art will never be the same. It may become another "fabulous invalid"; it may die; it may be reborn. We invite comment on these issues and their ramifications.

DAN ARMSTRONG

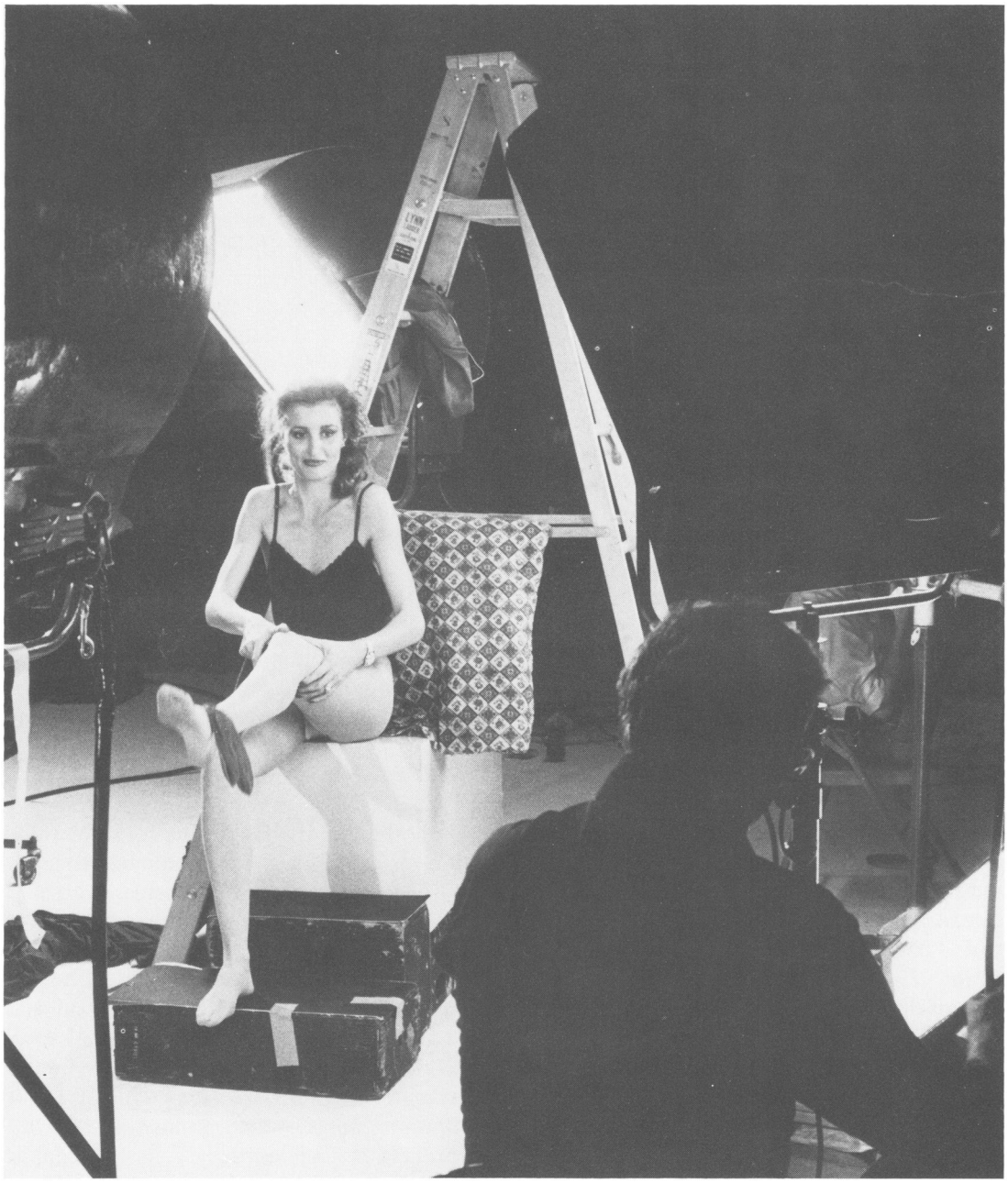
Wiseman's *Model* and the Documentary Project:

Toward a Radical Film Practice

While Frederick Wiseman's films bear out the claim that he is free of any fixed ideological position, including Marxism, there is no other American film-maker today whose work is more relevant to historical materialism. His fourteen documentaries produced between 1967 and 1980 offer a comprehensive analysis of American society. In the context of antagonistic class relations, these films examine the coercive and ideological apparatuses of the state (the bulk of his documentaries), commodity production and the modern assemblyline (*Meat*), and most recently cultural production (*Model*). Particularly useful for their insights into the class struggle at the level of ideology and cultural hegemony, these films offer an unparalleled social history and critique of daily life in America during the sixties and seventies. Furthermore, the ensemble of Wiseman's film practices, the distinctive set of formal devices and strategies he employs, has useful implications for the development of a politically effective materialist cinema in America. The typical Wiseman film is an open text which creates audience distance and critical reflection, committing the spectator to a (not Puritanical) work of co-producing meaning. Despite important differences the aesthetic is Brechtian, working against the grain of the culinary cinema produced by the dominant apparatus in America—both the Hollywood narrative feature film and the standard documentary. Of particular relevance to Wiseman's development of a radical film practice, *Model* (1980) self-reflexively examines the codes and conventions of cinematic and photographic representation. This film represents the fullest development of Wiseman's art and politics, and we shall take a closer look at it later.

A small but growing body of commentary on Wiseman recognizes his place within the traditions of Marxist social criticism and the aesthetics of a materialist cinema. Placing Wiseman's films in the tradition of *cinéma vérité* founded by the revolutionary Soviet film-maker, Dziga Vertov, Michael Arlen has written cogently of the affinity between the two in cinematic impulse and method, calling Wiseman "our Man with the Movie Camera."[1] Roland Tuch, working from a theoretical basis in the writings of Marxist aesthetician George Lukacs, contrasts Vertov's affirmative socialist analysis of labor in *Man With the Movie Camera* with Wiseman's chilling study of the alienation of labor on the modern assembly (disassembly) line in *Meat* (1976), a film which presents a process of alienation and reification so total that the workers themselves "have been reduced, in effect, to mere bodies, to meat."[2] Finally, Bill Nichols—combining the semiotics of Christian Metz, to offer a careful theory of structure, and the Marxism of Louis Althusser, to describe the "dialectic of individual and institution" which the films embody—identifies the characteristic features of Wiseman's distinctive style of *cinéma vérité*. Nichols is particularly useful in his description of Wiseman's films as "mosaics," in which the "facets" or "tesserae" (sequences) express distinct aspects of the total design without merging into a single impression or narrative. And he goes on to suggest that each film is "a facet in a mosaic constituted by his overall oeuvre."[3]

A major element in the unity of Wiseman's oeuvre that helps to define the relationships among the films as "facets" within the overall "mosaic" has not been described in the existing criticism. While everyone recognizes that Wiseman's films are studies of the fundamental institutions in American society, no



PHOTOS: OLIVER KOOL

one fully recognizes the extent of his analysis of the class struggle within this institutional context. Even Nichols, certainly the most sophisticated of Wiseman critics, asserts that Wiseman does not place the encounters between institutions and their clients in his films into the context of class differences and class struggle. In fact, however, Wiseman's films, both individually and collectively, examine contemporary American class struggle from the perspective of the ideological and cultural hegemony of the Professional-Managerial Class (PMC) over the subordinate working class. Unlike most other progressive documentaries about contemporary America which address "bread and butter" issues (Barbara Kopple's *Harlan County USA,* for example), Wiseman's films emphasize the "cultural" issues. The class struggle in Wiseman is fought over the issues of authority, skill and knowledge—all of which are at the center of the PMC/working class interface

in America today. Ultimately, his films examine the reproduction of capitalist culture and capitalist class relations through the work performed by the PMC within the various dominant institutions which his films observe. Wiseman's cinema can therefore be better understood in light of the three-class model of capitalism presented by Barbara and John Ehrenreich in the mid-seventies.[4]

Until the current two-year pause in his career, Wiseman produced one documentary each year in his comprehensive study of social production and cultural hegemony in America: *Titicut Follies* (1967), *High School* (1968), *Law and Order* (1969), *Hospital* (1970), *Basic Training* (1971), *Essene* (1972), *Juvenile Court* (1973), *Primate* (1974), *Welfare* (1975), *Meat* (1976), *Canal Zone* (1977), *Sinai Field Mission* (1978), *Manoeuvre* (1979), and *Model* (1980). The mere listing of film titles, indicating the general nature of each facet in the total mosaic, suggests the scope of the project and the range of institutions (social, military and corporate) treated. What is not immediately apparent are the intricate relationships among the various facets in the design. Generally, the films can usefully be seen in pairs or trios. Thus *High School* and *Basic Training* are to be seen together as a study of the relationships between education and the military. As the final "summing up" sequence in *High School* makes perfectly clear, schooling in America is in the service of the military, producing "parts" for the war machine. Similarly, the soldiers in boot camp in *Basic Training* are gradually transformed into proper fighting instruments through a program of classroom and field instruction that parodies the conventional educational process—complete with "orientation," "flunky" (Private Hickman) and, for the successful students, "Graduation" ceremonies.[5] What are generally conceived as separate spheres of society, Wiseman shows to be intimately connected, reciprocal and mutually sustaining. The mosaic of Wiseman's oeuvre is intricately bound together, facet to facet, by a network of cross references, mirror images, continuations and reversals of pattern too rich and complex to detail in a brief paper. But the critique of American civilization implicit in the total design is devastating.

The mosaic as a metaphor for Wiseman's documentary series is in one respect misleading: it suggests a fixed, static quality, which when considering the tone of his social criticism and the cast of his political thought, is not really accurate. As Wiseman goes even deeper into the institutional matrix of the American social formation in the course of his documentary project, his politics evolve from liberal reformism in the early films, through an increasing disillusionment in the middle films, and finally to a considerably more radical vision, essentially in harmony with the perspectives of historical materialism, by 1976 when *Meat* was produced. The usual critical view of Wiseman's later films as somehow less hard-hitting fails to recognize, I think, the subtler and more detached forms of social criticism in such films as *Model.* Where the early films like *Titicut Follies* and *High School* more directly express Wiseman's personal outrage, at times heavily underlining meaning and directing our emotional and moral allegiances, *Meat* and *Model* observe their respective subjects more analytically and dispassionately, inviting the viewer more fully and freely to participate in the process of constructing meaning. So while nothing in the later films seems as trenchant, for example, as the remarkable sequence in *Titicut Follies* in which Wiseman intercuts images showing the preparations of a dead inmate for burial with images of his being force-fed through the nose while still alive, there is merely nothing as heavy-handed. And the gain in formal subtlety and open-endedness in the later films is accompanied by changes of emphasis—away from specific institutional abuses and individual villainy or professional ineptness (e.g., the Viennese psychiatrist) and toward the broader, more impersonal mechanisms of the marketplace and the division of labor in a class-divided society. The genuinely hard-hitting insight of these later films is that the "system" is often most pernicious when it works the way it is supposed to, not when there is a gap between institutional ideology and practice or a breach of professional ethics. To what extent and in what ways major historical events "outside" Wiseman's films shaped these changes of political perspective "inside" them is difficult to gauge with any

precision. But some relation to changing prospects for rapid and positive social change is clear: as the anti-war movement and black rebellion of the sixties and the emergence of the women's movement in the early seventies gave way in the mid and late seventies to Watergate, economic and imperial decline, and the emergence of Reaganism and the New Right, Wiseman (like many on the American left) lost a great deal of his innocence. And that "loss of innocence" can be traced in his oeuvre.

Model begins and ends on a musical note familiar to students of his cinema. It opens, puzzlingly, with a band in Central Park striking up the elegant rondo from Mauret's "Symphonic Fanfares," the musical theme of public television's "Masterpiece Theater," and closes with a spectacular fashion-buyer's show, in which elegantly dressed models pirouette down a runway to a recorded medley of slick and snappy show tunes, most notably "Strike Up the Band." Wiseman's allusion to his very first documentary, *Titicut Follies,* is unmistakable: that film began, memorably, with a surreal, zombie-like rendition of "Strike Up the Band" as part of an inmate-staff variety show at the Bridgewater, Massachusetts State Hospital for the criminally insane. With this musical allusion Wiseman brackets his documentary series, first to last, and couples apparently unrelated worlds, while neatly suggesting the substantial unity of his films. While Wiseman's political vision changes and grows within the oeuvre, the fourteen documentaries from 1967 to 1980 are essentially one long film, one continuous political discourse. And *Model* in many ways is the film towards which the documentary project has been moving from the beginning. In subject matter, point of view, and means of representation, it is the culmination of Wiseman's cinema. However, through its dazzling analysis of photographic and cinematic production, *Model* reflects on all the earlier films in the documentary project, insofar as they exist on the level of cultural reproduction that is examined in the film. *Model* thus articulates the level of the social formation on which Wiseman has been working since 1967.

More successfully than any other film by Wiseman, *Model* immerses the spectator in the market society, a world of commodities where social relations are most clearly reduced to relations of purchase and sale. Zoli's agency, a kind of fashion model's meat market to which Wiseman returns throughout the film, is the central marketplace, offering to buy the labor (and good looks) of hopeful young models and to sell the services of the few it hires to customers in advertising, television, and films. In effect, Zoli's is the nexus in the film of a vast apparatus of cultural production which makes use of the camera to promote the goods and values of the marketplace. And while fixing the steady gaze of his camera eye on various facets of this apparatus, particularly advertising, Wiseman reveals much about the dominant means of social control and reproduction in the consumer society. Hegemony, the complex orchestration of consent, is guided by an omnipresent ideology of possessive and competitive individualism that celebrates the "good life" supposedly always within reach through purchases: beauty, glamor, youth, "freedom," leisure, wealth, sexuality, and "personality." It is precisely this imaginary realm, which promises personal transformation, that we see so carefully constructed in sequence after sequence in the film. *Model* shows us the highly organized production of what John Berger calls "glamor" and what, in a broader sense, Stuart Ewen calls "the political ideology of consumption."[6]

As Wiseman alternates between studio sets and street scenes in *Model,* he reveals an aspect of contemporary American culture which is represented in its camera-produced "public images" and reflected in myriad

social practices in the course of daily life. In a recent essay on modern American culture, Warren Susman describes precisely what I think Wiseman shows us in *Model:* a culture of "personality." Among other things this culture of personality involves the terrible need to make an impression on others, to be seen as Somebody: "The problem is clear. We live now constantly in a crowd: how can we distinguish ourselves from others in that crowd? While the term is never used, the question is clearly one of life in a mass society ('crowd' is the most commonly used word)."[7] "Personality," as Susman has defined it, is precisely what the advertisers in *Model* purport to sell and what the models posing try to portray. Furthermore, the pursuit of personality, with its attendant emphasis on performance, is what Wiseman shows us in a number of street scenes. Toward the end of the film, for example, a young black man dances, transistor radio in hand, in front of a department store window, a star watching himself in his own movie. By this continual alternation and intermingling of the realms of "the imaginary" and "the real," Wiseman reveals an omnipresent ideology of a distinctly Althusserian kind: largely unconscious, widely diffused (like air) in society, a process or operation negotiated in a variety of ways.

Throughout *Model* Wiseman plays with notions of the imaginary and the real—and their interdependence. In sequence after sequence, he shows us models at work, presenting themselves to the camera after being suitably dressed, painted, combed, brushed, placed into a context, and moved about. They are, in effect, so many props, inanimate objects, mannequins to display the clothing and project "personality." In one revealing sequence, three French models get the pose "right" only after following directions to "Ignore one another. Pretend you're mannequins in a Bloomingdale window." Later in the film, at a party of the "beautiful people," where male models line the walls in frozen poses, Wiseman moves his camera and sound recorder around the room to capture a highly artificial social event in which suddenly, in the final shot, a mannequin stands in profile amidst clusters of "beautiful people" in conversation. And throughout the film, Wiseman returns, over and over again, to beautifully clothed mannequins in department store windows, employing them as symbols of the commodified self, the individual as object and product of the market. And always, as we are shown the mannequins, we see the reflections in the glass of passersby, the prospective consumers of the goods, whose coexistence with the mannequins seems ontologically equivalent. The two realms, "real" and "imaginary," are fused. Momentarily, Wiseman is able to freeze the process or operation of the marketplace ideology as it is lived in the consumer society.

Model is Wiseman's *Man with the Movie Camera,* in which he investigates our contemporary "Camera Age" and the performances of the main actor in that age, the camera itself. Like Vertov before him, Wiseman simultaneously provides a critique of daily life (though a narrower slice of it) and of the illusionary nature of photographic and cinematic representation. While documenting the world of high-fashion modeling at various distances and proximities to life on the streets of New York city, *Model* turns back on itself, self-reflexively examining the methods and means of creating meaning within camera-produced texts, its own as well as those of the cultural producers whose work Wiseman observes in the film. And Wiseman leads us to see how these texts—*Model* itself, the numerous ads and fashion photos, the 30-second Evan-Picone television commercial, and the documentary being filmed within Wiseman's larger documentary—can have such different political messages, while speaking in the same language, using the same grammar.

Putting Wiseman's use of the camera temporarily aside, *Model* shows us the various ways in which the camera is employed, to conceal reality in the service of the marketplace. Presenting the images and sounds of "the good life," these fashion photographs and television commercials (and in a different way also the documentary-within-the-documentary) deny the process by which they were constructed and came to be imprinted on film stock. The tedious, variously trained and paid, highly technical, infinitely specialized, alienated labor which we have seen go into the final product is always denied. And while denying its own process, the final product suppresses any no-

tions of labor whatsoever, creating the impression of a world of leisure, freedom, and pleasure, where no one needs to work. Nowhere in the film is this gap between process and product more evident than in the extended sequence which shows the making of a television commercial for Evan-Picone hosiery. For nearly half an hour we watch an immense production unfold, culminating in a slow, mechanical process whereby a four-second "peacock effect" is to be produced by filming a model's leg in eight different positions. The labor of many is carefully documented, from the production crewman who sweeps the sidewalk to the directors who alternately browbeat and cajole the models, who really *are* reduced to mere props. Particularly memorable in this respect are the labors of the female model whose leg is photographed over 79 takes and who is, by the end, nearly exhausted from kicking and holding her leg in place before the screen. The resulting commercial, which Wiseman shows us, is stunning for the suppressions that are revealed and for the mystified impression of reality created: a world of instant happiness and beauty where the only work suggested is the dazzling unfolding of a peacock's tail feathers.

Not merely human labor but all the various mechanical and chemical processes of photography and cinematography are being suppressed, as we see, in cultural products like the Evan-Picone commercial. Walter Benjamin's remark about film in general applies here: "The equipment-free aspect of reality here has become the height of artifice; the sight of immediate reality has become an orchid in the land of technology."[8] And the resulting texts all convey the same message, a highly depoliticized impression of reality that denies the class-based and class-divided work system in order to reproduce it. Commodities, the collective product of that class system, must seem to float in a world apart, though capable of being entered through "magical" purchases. Whatever might interfere with the smooth and automatic transport of the spectator-consumer in to this world, this Fantasy Island, must be carefully avoided. Particularly through the use of the close-up, by detaching the beautiful faces of these models and the aura of personality which they project, the camera renders reality from a point of view designed to enchant the viewer with visions of personal transformation.

Wiseman uses his own camera differently in *Model,* not to conceal but to reveal. By continually altering the length, angle, distance and point of view of his shots, he shows us the larger context and restores the "production" suppressed by the others. Like Vertov's Kino-eye, Wiseman's camera is used to unmask reality, "to strip us bare, so that he may build us anew." It is not that Wiseman is technically incapable of the slick and ideologically determined use of the camera in order to promote the status quo of the consumer society. Several times, but particularly in one long sequence involving a female model posing in several disguises or costumes, Wiseman uses

his porta-pack camera in precisely the same way that the many fashion photographers have used their cameras throughout *Model*—to celebrate the commodity-model, to caress the model almost sexually through close-ups from various angles. Wiseman's success at catching the look and feel of a 35mm fashion photograph can be gauged by the close similarity between Wiseman's images in that sequence and those still photographs of the same model which are inspected under magnifying glass by some Zoli employees in a sequence near the end of the film. Wiseman's art here is the height of self-reflexivity: as he shows us these still photographs near the end, he refers us back to the success of his own camera, his parody of 35mm fashion photography in the earlier sequence, bringing into relief his own very different use of the camera.

The place that Wiseman's camera creates for the viewer is not at all the place created for the spectator-consumer by the other camera-users in *Model:* we are not passively to consume a mystified image or text which seals us into the place of consuming subject. Instead, we are installed into a place much like that occupied by the numerous residents of New York City who are several times in the film shown observing the Evan-Picone commercial and other advertisements made on the street—standing outside, watching the "enchanted world" as it is being so obviously and heavily produced, and (temporarily?) immune to its enchantment. But Wiseman gives us the added perspective of watching *them* watch the spectacle being made, giving us (the mass or crowd in a mass society) the opportunity to inspect ourselves as the mass. And in frequent close-ups of the faces of these ordinary people (so different from the "beautiful people" within the spectacle) we see something approaching disgust, or perhaps disenchantment. In quite a different (and much less obvious) way than earlier films by Wiseman, *Model* violates a taboo, revealing images which are generally concealed in our culture. While *Titicut Follies* may show us naked madmen dancing in their cells, *Model* shows us the making of our public images, the various liftings and adjustments whereby the mask is so carefully put into place. The looks on the very ordinary faces of the pedestrian-spectators suggest—not unlike our response to *Model* as a whole—the shock of an exposure to the forbidden. That "crowd" is us.

The self-reflexivity of *Model,* inherent in many of the film's strategies that I have discussed, is signaled directly by the frequent glimpses in the second half of the film of documentary film crews at work: at the party of beautiful people where the mannequin suddenly appears, which I discussed before; at interview sessions with two professional male models and later with Zoli himself; and particularly at a shower scene involving a male model, which has apparently been staged by a documentary film crew whose work Wiseman documents. In all these sequences we are shown the cameras, sound equipment, and crewmen at work—reminding us of the very similar process Wiseman is using to produce *Model,* the larger documentary as it were. By referring us to the devices and methods of the documentary, however different from his own, Wiseman reminds us of his own sleights of hand, by which he too creates an illusion giving the impression of reality. In this way Wiseman moves us from the position of passive consumers of an imaginary reality to the position of distanced, demystified co-producers of the film's meaning, invited to observe and puzzle out the paradoxes and contradictions of the text. By exposing the transparencies and self-effacements of the traditional realist text which are everywhere else in the film seen to define the limits of cultural production by the dominant apparatus, Wiseman offers a critique of the way in which the media employ the camera in the service of the dominant ideology. This dominant ideology of the marketplace and bourgeois social arrangements, we come to see, is given free passage in the other texts within the film—and is reinforced by the camera's own ideology, the ideology of the mirror.

Wiseman's critique of the ideology of the mirror, the ideology whereby the camera creates the impression of reality in order to promote an imaginary relationship of opposition-identity, is suggested in the many sequences in *Model* in which Wiseman teasingly plays with mirrors, shooting into them to document negative film space. Early in the film, for example, production crewmen on location hold up a giant mirror to create light effects from the reflected sun in a sequence

involving a male and female model posing in and around an automobile while a helicopter hovers overhead. Wiseman shoots the sequence alternately in positive and negative film space, frequently shooting into the mirror to show us the models, crew and equipment as they are reflected there. The spectator-effect is one of purposeful confusion: the viewer is not always sure in this sequence where he or she is, where the "real" (positive) and "imaginary" (negative) space begin and end. Similarly, late in the film, during the sequence in the shower, Wiseman shoots nearly the entire sequence into the vanity-mirror opposite to the shower where the male model is showering. But we are made aware that Wiseman is shooting this sequence in negative space (into the mirror) only near the end of it, when Wiseman's cameraman turns the angle of his camera just enough to reveal himself (or is it the cameraman from the *other* documentary crew?) in the mirror. Momentarily, we see the model finishing his shower and the cameraman in front of him shooting the scene from the reflection in the vanity-mirror. Again, we as spectators are not really sure where we stand in relation to "reality." Through his self-reflexive exploration of negative film space, Wiseman defeats the ideology of the camera, the impression of reality created to enchant the viewer into accepting the imaginary, illusory world as the "real" one. And in the process Wiseman blocks passage to the spectator of the dominant ideology of "personality" and competitive individualism in which the commodity-model in the shower is bathed and which the documentary within Wiseman's documentary is attempting to celebrate.

Model thus brings to a halt the documentary project which began fourteen films earlier with *Titicut Follies* in 1967. With the emergence of this latest film by Wiseman, we can see more clearly his contribution toward the development of a materialist cinema in America. The self-reflexivity and the Althusserian critique of ideology which *Model* displays indicate that Wiseman is a political film-maker who must be carefully studied by Marxists and others who would develop a radical film practice in this country. The typical Wiseman film, and *Model* above all, is a politically motivated, modernist, open text, running thoroughly counter to the culinary cinema generally produced in America. As in the theater of Brecht, Wiseman's cinema offers not the pleasures of identification and catharsis within an imaginary relationship to the real but the pleasures that arise out of instruction, satisfying our need to understand the nature of social reality. His cinema fulfills the prescription which Fredric Jameson has given for a revolutionary aesthetic in Brechtian tradition: Wiseman "transforms the process of 'knowing the world' into a source of delight or pleasure in its own right; and this is the fundamental step in the construction of a properly Brechtian aesthetic."[9] In Wiseman's documentary project, as in Brecht, pleasure is a function of coming to know the world in order to change it.

There is simply no other film-maker in America today who has illuminated so well as much of our collective experience during the past decade and a half. I am continually struck when teaching Wiseman in the classroom how well his films are able to create connections among those of us who watch and discuss them, drawing on our shared experience and moving to the center of those tensions and contradictions which inform it. The impact is huge, partly for the temporary community that they create, but also because of the range and variety of pleasures they offer. Inured as we are to the pandered dreams and formulas of Hollywood and television, Wiseman's documentaries explode our ingrained expectations and temporarily repair the cleavage between work and play that defines ordinary daily life and cultural experience. As we watch these films, the realm of the quotidian is rescued from the obfuscations of "the obvious." By making the familiar strange and the strange familiar, Wiseman helps to restore our capacity to take back the control of our lives.

NOTES

1. Michael Arlen, "Fred Wiseman's Kino Pravda" in *The Camera Age* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill, 1976), p. 120.
2. Roland Tuch, "Frederick Wiseman's Cinema of Alienation: A Vision of Work on the Assembly Line," *Film Library Quarterly II* (1978), p. 14.
3. Bill Nichols, *Ideology and the Image: Social Representation in the Cinema and Other Media* (Bloomington:

Indiana University Press, 1981), p. 211. Nichols makes no claims to resolve the problematic nature of the place of the viewer in the Wiseman text but argues that the recent materialist critique of the realist text cannot be applied simply to dismiss the films because of their self-effacing style: "Although Wiseman's films are not self-reflexive in a formalist or political (Brechtian) sense, neither are they simple transparencies of a bourgeois world that we, as spectators, passively contemplate" (p. 235). As I shall argue later in this paper, *Model,* which appeared after Nichols wrote the above passage, takes up the project of resolving these structural tensions through a self-reflexive text which places the viewer unambiguously beyond the imaginary relationship and the realm of the "merely enjoyable" or pleasurable.

4. See Barbara and John Ehrenreich, "The Professional-Managerial Class," ed. Pat Walker, *Between Labor and Capital* (Boston: South End Press, 1979), pp. 5-45. Rejecting the traditional Marxist two-class model of capitalism as inadequate for an understanding of late capitalism, the Ehrenreichs define the place and function of the PMC in the social formation in precisely the ways that Wiseman captures in his cinema: to reproduce capitalist culture and capitalist class relations. For example, Wiseman's most Marxist works—the Lukacsian *Meat* and the Althusserian *Model*—neatly "cover" the two major divisions within the PMC that the Ehrenreichs describe, suggesting much about the complex nature of social control through ideological consent in the interrelated processes of production and consumption.

5. For a full discussion of *Basic Training* as a sequel to *High School* and a parody of the educational process see Richard Fuller, *"Basic Training," Frederick Wiseman,* Thomas R. Atkin, ed. (New York: Monarch Press, 1976), pp. 103-112.

6. See John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (New York: Viking Press, 1973) and the film by the same title, particularly part four, "Painting and Advertising" and Stuart Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976).

7. Warren I. Susman, " 'Personality' and the Making of Twentieth-Century Culture," in J. Highman & P. K. Conklin, eds., *New Directions in American Intellectual History* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1979), pp. 217-218.

8. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations,* trans., Harry Zohn (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1955), p. 235.

9. Fredric Jameson, "Reflections in Conclusion," *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: New Left Books, 1978), pp. 204-205. Quoted in Sylvia Harvey, *May '68 and Film Culture* (London: British Film Institute, 1980), p. 81.

DAVID BOYD

Persona and the Cinema of Interpretation

It's nearly twenty years now since Susan Sontag issued her famous diatribe "Against Interpretation," concluding with the claim that "in place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art."[1] However controversial at the time, Sontag's manifesto had little immediate impact on academic criticism (presumably most academics preferred to reserve "erotics" as an extracurricular pursuit). But the academy has found it less easy to ignore more recent urgings, like those of Jonathan Culler, for instance, that critical studies should progress "Beyond Interpretation"[2] to an examination of the conditions that make interpretation possible.

Probably the most radical challenge to the interpretive *status quo* in recent years, however, has been posed by the emergence of deconstructive criticism. Deconstruction has made itself felt most forcefully, in fact, not as a metaphysic or anti-metaphysic, but precisely as an alternative to interpretation. Jacques Derrida's claim that "the absence of a transcendental signified extends the domain and play of signification infinitely"[3] has served most influentially to legitimize a different form of textual analysis, one which replaces the quest for a single determinate meaning with "the careful teasing out of warring forces of signification within the text itself."[4]

These various challenges have not gone unresisted, of course. One of the more ingenious, if ultimately limited, defenses of the value and necessity of interpretation has been offered by Naomi Schor, who points out that interpretation is not exclusively the concern of critics, but frequently an obsession shared by artists, as well. Basing her argument on such pivotal writers of the early modern period as James, Proust, and Kafka, Schor contends that if "interpretation is viewed not as something that is done *to* fiction but rather as

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something that is done *in* fiction, then to be against interpretation becomes an untenable position, for it is tantamount to rejecting a considerable amount of (modern) fiction that is explicitly, indeed insistently, concerned with interpretation: its scope and its limits, its necessity and its frustrations."[5]

As an argument in defense of interpretation, this is really rather thin, but it does open up an interesting area of inquiry. And one, what's more, that's at least as relevant to film studies as to literary studies. Because there is, of course, a considerable body of film that is just as "explicitly, indeed insistently, concerned with interpretation."[5] Some of the more obvious instances come to mind almost immediately: *Rashomon, Blow-Up, Last Year at Marienbad, Citizen Kane, 8½*, any number of Hitchcock's films (*Vertigo, Rear Window*), and so on and so forth. All of these films force upon the viewer, narratively and thematically, a self-conscious awareness of his or her own interpretive activity, and many of them do so affectively, as well, in that they tend to be, as Naomi Schor terms Kafka's novels, " 'hysterical' texts (hysterical in the sense that they seem to invite rape, while denying penetration)." Or, in less sexist terms, they characteristically invoke "the hermeneutic double-bind: the absolute necessity to interpret goes hand in hand with the total impossibility to validate interpretation."[6]

If the existence of this cinema of interpretation is incontestable, the sort of critical use to which it might best be put is not. Naomi Schor assumes that the interpretive fictions which she discusses were intended, and must be accepted, as general models, either exemplary or cautionary, that "via the interpretant [that is, the character within the narrative action engaged in some sort of interpretive activity] the author is trying to tell the interpreter something *about* interpretation and the interpreter would do well to listen and take note."[7] But there is another way of approaching a fiction of interpretation, whether literary or cinematic. Instead of allegorizing it as an image of the interpretive process in general, we can attempt to relate it to our own interpretation of the particular text itself. And instead of assuming that the interpretive fiction should be regarded as a privileged model, that Kafka will teach us how to read *The Trial,* or Kurosawa how to read *Rashomon,* as Fielding

teaches us how to read *Tom Jones* (and how, according to the orthodox view, we must read it), we can place the interpretation *within* the text and our own interpretation *of* the text in an ongoing dialectical relationship.

The working out of this dialectic can potentially lead to a more complex understanding of the text, of our own critical practice, and, perhaps most interestingly, of the relationship between the two. For the interpretation of an interpretive fiction necessarily constitutes a paradigmatic instance of the process through which an interpretation "not only elucidates the text but also reproduces it dramatically, unwittingly participates in it."[8] This "displaced reenactment of a text's scenario"[9] is, of course, only very rarely a *literal* reenactment. Instances, like Nabokov's *Pale Fire,* of fictions explicitly concerned with the interpretation of other fictions are few and far between. More frequently, fictions of interpretation operate through various interpretive metaphors. In the case of the cinema of interpretation, the most obvious of these metaphors is the attempt to choose among various contradictory accounts of a single narrative event, the effort, by viewer and character alike, to determine what "really" happened in the woods in *Rashomon,* or in the park in *Blow-Up,* or *Last Year at Marienbad,* or whatever.

Paradoxically, our own interpretive practice is sometimes most clearly illuminated by such a metaphor precisely at the point at which it begins to break down. The widely felt dissatisfaction with the conclusion of *Rashomon,* for instance, arises not only from its sentimentality, but also from just such a breakdown of the interpretive metaphor which has largely structured our previous understanding of the film. Invited at the end to believe the one character whom we know for a certainty to have lied (because he alone provides two contradictory verions of the past), we are forced to a belated recognition of two problematic aspects of the entire metaphor: first, that we have been asked to ground our interpretation of the text in the supposition of a pretext (that *something* "really happened" in the woods), whereas the pre-text, of course, derives its own "reality," its very existence, solely from the text; and second, that we have been expected to privilege certain sections of the text ontologically, declare them more "real" than others, whereas all are equally real, equally unreal, equally fictive, and the entire effect of the film has depended on the ability of film "to confer on all events, without indications to the contrary, an equivalent degree of reality: everything shown on the screen is *there,* present."[10]

Under the pressure of such contradictions, a chasm opens up between the interpretive situation inside the text and outside it, between the interpretant on the screen and the interpreter in the audience. This gap, furthermore, exposes not only the basic limitations of the interpretive metaphor on which the film has been based, but also the theoretically unresolved problems that underlie our interpretive practice in general: first, the unavailability of a pre-text, a prior reality, in which to ground our interpretation of the text (the problem, in other words, of the referentiality of fiction); and second, the difficulty of explaining one part of the text by reference to another, since everything within the text is equally in need of interpretation (the problem of the hermeneutic circle).

So this sort of metaphorical breakdown ultimately signals an underlying theoretical scandal. It places in jeopardy, not just a particular interpretation of a particular text, but rather the very possibility of interpretation. For some critical approaches, however, this situation presents itself, not as a threat, but rather as an opportunity. The same sort of breakdown which might seem to threaten an end to interpretation can equally well afford a beginning to deconstruction, to the rhetorical analysis of the text in order to reveal the ways in which it renders itself susceptible to incompatible, but equally legitimate, interpretations.

The cinema of interpretation as a whole therefore presents itself as an obvious opportunity for deconstructive inquiry. But there are differences of degree. Even if we accept the somewhat dogmatic insistency of J. Hillis Miller that all texts self-deconstruct and do so knowingly, that "Deconstruction is not a dismantling of the structure of the text but a demonstration that it has already dismantled itself,"[11] some texts nevertheless dismantle themselves a good deal more insistently than others. Few do so more spectacularly than *Persona,* or so render themselves more invul-

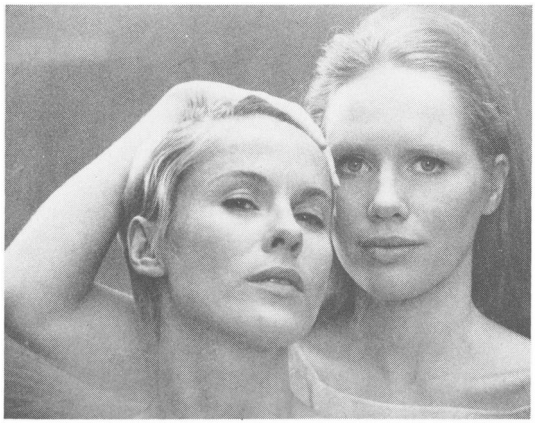
nerable, apparently, to conventional interpretive attack.

Even within Naomi Schor's category of "hysterical" texts, *Persona* constitutes a particularly striking case of a text which, after repeated critical violations, remains curiously intact. Nothing approaching a critical consensus seems to have been achieved on even the most local issues. John Simon reports, for instance, that Elizabeth "prayerfully contemplates" the photograph from the Warsaw ghetto, Robin Wood that she studies it "with fascinated horror," and Birgitta Steene that she views it "with perfect calm," that it "arouses no visible reaction in her."[12] One explanation for this marked lack of an interpretive consensus is that most critics actually interpret, not the film, but rather their own prior interpretation of the film, a "constructed version, half 'story' and half 'meaning'," as Susan Sontag says, from which they then "read off a number of further meanings. Some regard the transactions between Elizabeth and Alma as illustrating some impersonal law which operates intermittently in human affairs; no ultimate responsibility pertains to either of them. Others posit a conscious cannibalism of the innocent Alma by the actress—and thus read the film as a parable of the predatory energies of the artist forever scavenging for 'material.' Other critics move quickly to an even more general plane, and extract from *Persona* a diagnosis of the contemporary dissociation of personality, a demonstration of the inevitable failure of goodwill and trust, and predictably correct views on such matters as the alienated affluent society, the nature of madness, psychiatry and its limitations, the American War in Vietnam, the Western legacy of sexual guilt, and the Six Million."[13]

No doubt some of these readings well justify Sontag's acidic tone, but perhaps the tendency of critics so consistently to interpret their own interpretations of the film is understandable in view of the position it holds within the cinema of interpretation. One of the characteristic shot-compositions of *Persona* is the close-up in which one head is turned towards the side of the frame, while another faces directly out at the audience. Such shots might serve as emblems of the film's peculiarly insistent positioning of itself at the intersection of the diegetic axis (the relationship of character and character) and the affective axis (the relationship of viewer and film), and as reminders that an interpretive drama is being played out along each of these axes. All fictions are actually located at such an intersection, of course, and all fictions of interpretation more or less explicitly so. The peculiarities of *Persona* arise from the precise nature of the parallel difficulties encountered by interpreter and interpretant in their respective dramas.

The first such difficulty is simply that of establishing the relationship between the two. Normally, the identification of the interpreter with the interpretant is absolutely basic to the entire appeal of fictions of interpretation. "If there existed a barometer capable of measuring the narcissistic gratification afforded by literary works," Naomi Schor says, "then fictions of interpretation would push the needle way over, for what could comfort and delight the interpreter more than to find the interpretant, his specular image, shimmering on the printed page [or, in this case, even more literally shimmering on the screen], mirroring his confusions as well as his triumphs."[14] In *Persona,* however, such narcissistic gratification proves increasingly hard to come by, as the interpreter's identification *with* the interpretant is repeatedly subverted by his uncertainty concerning the identification *of* the interpretant.

Initially, the structure of the interpretive situation seems clear enough: since Elizabeth is immediately established as the patient, the puzzle, the problem to be solved, it necessarily follows that Alma must be the interpretant, and it is with Alma, accordingly, that we initially identify. And this identification plays a crucial role in structuring our experience of the first half of the film, that section of the film to which many viewers and critics subsequently cling so desperately because of the apparent familiarity of its fictional rhetoric and, in particular, as Robin Wood puts it, because of the absence, for the most part, of anything "to distance or distract us from a moral and psychological exploration of the characters and their relationships, via the emotional-intellectual processes through which we customarily experience fictional narratives."[15] Problematic scenes, like those in which Elizabeth may or may not speak to



Alma, and may or may not visit Alma's room by night, scenes which are problematic precisely because they *do* threaten "to distance or distract us from a moral and psychological exploration of the characters and their relationships," are typically dealt with by interpreting them as part of Alma's subjective experience, placing quotation marks around them. The uncertainty is thus localized and contained; the problem is Alma's, not ours. In this way, the viewer's identification with Alma plays an essential part in establishing that hierarchy of discourses which Colin McCabe has argued is the dominant feature of the classic realist text.[16]

In the latter part of the film, of course, this hierarchy of discourses becomes increasingly difficult, and ultimately impossible, to maintain. But its eventual breakdown in the second half of the film is prepared for in the first half by the progressive subversion of Alma's position as identification figure and the gradual emergence of Elizabeth as an unexpected rival for the role. The viewer can scarcely fail to note, for instance, that during the longest sequence in this part of the film, Alma's monologue about the orgy on the beach, it is Elizabeth who serves as his surrogate on screen, sitting as a silent spectator in the dark. And this change of status on Elizabeth's part is even more clearly signalled at the beginning of the following sequence, when she suddenly pops up into the unoccupied frame and points her own camera out at the audience. Along both axes of the film, the previously assumed relationship of subject and object, observer and observed, interpreter and text, is unmistakably under challenge.

Within the interpretive drama on screen, this challenge culminates in the scene in which Alma reads Elizabeth's letter to the psychiatrist. In opening the letter, Alma is asserting the prerogatives of the interpreter, but the contents of the letter immediately rob her of those prerogatives. For she now finds herself a text to be read, the object of shared speculation by the two professional interpreters, the actress and the psychiatrist. And at the same time, her prior monopoly on the power of articulation is usurped. Thus divested of her role of interpreter, in the following scene with the broken glass she renounces her other defining role as well, that of carer. By this point, the essential terms on which the relationship between Alma and Elizabeth was originally established have been utterly shattered, and this is reflected along the other axis of the film by a perfectly literal rupture, the simulated breakdown of the projector.

As the image gradually refocuses after that breakdown, an attempt is initially made to reconstitute the drama on the previous terms. But that attempt inevitably fails, and a few scenes later, at the end of Alma's repeated monologue about Elizabeth and her son, the film is literally ruptured a second time, this time vertically instead of horizontally, with the split-screen fusion of the two faces. For Alma, with the integrity and autonomy of her established identity under threat, this moment clearly marks the most powerful *aporia,* the most acute moment of puzzlement, in her interpretive drama.

The repetition of this entire monologue is so extravagant a rhetorical figure, however, that it resists reading in purely diegetic terms. It can be read that way, admittedly. Alfred Guzzetti has rightly insisted that the repetition does not impair the *syntactical* intelligibility of the scene; most viewers, that is, presumably realize that, on the level of what Guzzetti calls "deep structure," the two monologues are identical, rather than successive. And no doubt it can be rendered *thematically* intelligible, as well, either as simply one more indication of "the director's concern elsewhere in this work with the processes of cinema and representation,"[17] as Guzzetti sees it, or as signalling, in Robin Wood's words, "Alma's gradual realization that in taking over Elizabeth's mind she becomes Elizabeth, and thus is talking about herself—that the cruelty she

is denouncing is something within *her* . . ."[18] But surely this *aporia* should share something of Alma's puzzlement. If the central procedure of deconstruction is, as Derrida describes it, a double-reading which simultaneously acknowledges the legibility of a text and demonstrates the text's inevitable subversion of that legibility, there could scarcely be a more literal and explicit invitation to such a reading than the repeated monologue.

What such a double-reading serves to expose is an interpretive ambiguity which ultimately informs *Persona* as a whole. On first telling, and on first reading, the story of Elizabeth's relationship with her son is accepted at face value. Blocking out commonsensical doubts about how Alma could possibly be privy to such secrets, we gratefully seize upon the story as an "explanation" of the present in terms of the past, of Elizabeth's present state in terms of her past history. But on second telling, and second reading, an alternative interpretation presents itself: that Alma is not revealing Elizabeth's history, but rather inventing it, extrapolating a past out of her interpretation of Elizabeth's present.

What is really involved in this double-reading is a tension between what Jonathan Culler describes as two fundamentally opposed narrative logics: "One may maintain the primacy of the event: it took place at the appropriate moment and determined subsequent events and their significance. Or one can maintain that the structures of signification, the discursive requirements, work to produce a fictional or tropological event."[19] The emergence of this alternative narrative logic, as Cynthia Chase has said in discussing its operation in *Daniel Deronda,* implies not merely "a violation of genre conventions or of *vraisemblance* but a deconstruction of cause. . . . It is a chiasmus or a metalepsis, a reversal of the temporal status of cause and effect: cause is relocated in the present and effect in the past."[20]

This alternative logic suggested by a double-reading of the repeated monologue immediately makes available similar double-readings of other sections of the film as well. The immediately preceding scene in which Alma makes love to Elizabeth's husband, for instance, is just as plausibly read as the production, by the "discursive requirements" of the dramatic situation, of "a fictional or tropological event." That is, unlike the case in Strindberg's *The Stronger,* which has been widely cited as a probable influence on the film, the sexual conflict in *Persona* is not a prior fact of causality, but rather is predicated by the interpretive demands of the situation. The "cause," the "explanation," conventionally expected for a conflict like that of Alma and Elizabeth is a sexual triangle, and such a triangle is, therefore, belatedly produced.

Once the process of double-reading is initiated, however, its ultimate effects extend much further than this. It subverts, indeed, the putative stability of the entire first half of the film by revealing that, if less obviously ambiguous than the second half, it is nevertheless just as susceptible to genuinely radical reinterpretation. Some sort of reinterpretation of the earlier part of the film is necessitated by the very attempt to recuperate the later part, to render it once more conventionally interpretable. Most critics respond to the possibility that Alma is inventing a past for Elizabeth by unwittingly emulating her procedure and themselves inventing, or extrapolating, a past for Alma, as well. Specifically, the event in Alma's past frequently cited as "explaining" the repeated monologue is her abortion, the "cause," presumably, of that guilt which she now projects onto Elizabeth.

The problem is that once the seed of suspicion has been planted, its growth cannot be contained. All that we know of what has now retrospectively emerged as a crucial event, Alma's abortion, we know only by means of her own narration. But if Alma's version of Elizabeth's past is susceptible to double-reading, why should her version of her own past, the orgy monologue, be exempt from a similar reading? Indeed, in a film in which intrusions from the "real" world are authenticated, in large part, by their very fragmentariness (the television newsclip of the burning monk, the photograph from the Warsaw ghetto), narrative set-pieces like both of Alma's monologues are almost automatically suspect simply by virtue of their completeness and circumstantial detail.

But there are more specific grounds for suspicion, as well, in the actual content of the orgy monologue, which is as easily interpreted in terms of self-creation as in terms of self-revelation. It can just as legitimately be read,

that is, as a narrative performance on Alma's past, extrapolating a past out of the materials of the present, the physical details and the emotional structures. In Alma's story, she and Katrina are lying on the beach, as she and Elizabeth were in the preceding scene, wearing the large straw hats that she and Elizabeth wore in the scene before that. In the story, the boys serve primarily to channel the sexual energy flowing between the two women, as Elizabeth's husband subsequently serves to express obliquely the relationship between Elizabeth and Alma. In the scene that Alma describes, Katrina lies beside her on the sand, voyeuristically observing her sexual performance, while in the scene on screen Elizabeth lies on the bed "as if absorbing the narrated sexual experiences into her own body."[21]

Presumably one reason that such precise parallels fail to arouse the suspicions of most viewers is the sheer intensity of Bibi Anderson's performance; she acts so powerfully that we assume Alma cannot be acting at all. But the film subsequently provides both the interpretant and the interpreter with reason to doubt the reliability of judgments based on performances. For just as the viewer takes Bibi Anderson's performance during the orgy monologue as sanctioning an interpretation of Alma's behavior as uncontrolled self-revelation, so Elizabeth's performance during the same scene is taken by Alma as sanctioning an interpretation of Elizabeth's response as one of compassionate concern. But Elizabeth's letter, of course, reveals just how mistaken Alma's interpretation really was and inevitably casts doubt upon our own as well.

What all this amounts to is not an argument for the re-interpretation of this particular scene, but, just the opposite, evidence of the essential futility of the entire process of re-interpretation. This double-reading of Alma's first monologue originated, after all, in the attempt to resolve the interpretive difficulties posed by the double-reading of her second monologue. In the light of the attempted re-interpretation, though, the repeated monologue still remains obstinately double. The alternative reading of that monologue (that Alma is projecting herself onto, rather than into, Elizabeth) has proven to be neither more nor less plausible, neither better nor worse grounded, than the first (that the events of the monologue "really happened" and that they "explain" Elizabeth's subsequent behavior). "The deconstructive operation," as Cynthia Chase insists, "while it consists in pointing out that the concept of causality amounts to an aberrant and arbitrary ordering of rhetorical elements, is itself no more than an equally aberrant reordering of these elements, the performance of another tropological operation. It is for this special reason that a deconstruction is not a refutation, or that a deconstructive 'refutation' can claim for itself no more authority than the refuted concept."[22]

But it claims no *less* authority, either. It leaves the interpreter faced with two equally legitimate interpretations and no apparent grounds for choosing between them. And instead of resolving their tension, the attempted re-interpretation actually compounds it. The first double-reading leads to a second, and the hope of resolution recedes like the horizon. And so it inevitably must, for "while any act of interpretation must posit something as given," as Culler says, "this given is not a fixed center around which all interpretations turn but rather a product of other interpretations which take something else as given."[20] So the process of re-interpretation necessarily proves either circular or infinitely regressive.

The regressive search for interpretive grounds can admittedly be pursued much further than we have so far in the hope of locating some ultimate and unproblematical given from which all else is derived and in terms of which all else can be explained, some final point of rest. And in the case of *Persona,* the regressive movement does ultimately lead to what might well seem an absolute of sorts. For a single instant at the beginning of the film we do confront an image that seems genuinely unproblematical, ontologically pure, beyond interpretation. The *fiat lux* with which the film begins is absolutely literal, an image neither more nor less than what it seems to be: a light shining on the screen.

Even for that instant, though, the audience waits impatiently for this image to resolve itself into a sign, a representation of something else. When it does so, the light transforms itself into a representation of its own origins, the lighting of the arc lamp, thus redirecting our attention from the front of the auditorium to the rear. And so, in the very

first instant of signification, we find ourselves positioned, quite literally, in the space opened up between the constituent parts of this first sign, the signifier on the screen in front of us, the signified in the box behind. At the same time, this shift from sensation to representation opens up a temporal space as well. For the shot of the lighting of the arc lamp is a representation of something not only other than itself, but also necessarily prior to itself, the lighting of the real lamp which enables the representation to be seen. The preceding image, consequently, is revealed as less absolute a beginning than it seemed. The first image of the film announces that it is beginning, but is the first sign that it had already begun.

The beginning of the physical event of the film represented by the lighting of the lamp, however, is itself quickly revealed as no more absolute a point of origin than the beginning of the perceptual event signalled by the initial nonrepresentative image, for it is immediately succeeded by reminders of a whole series of further "beginnings": the clip from the silent farce points to the beginnings of film art, the shot of a nail being driven into a hand to the beginning of a religious and cultural tradition, the systematic construction of a sense of place from a succession of shots to the beginnings of a narrative mode.

Bergman himself has claimed that the entire opening sequence is concerned with the film's *authorial* beginnings, that it is "a poem, not in words, but in images, about the situation in which *Persona* had originated. I reflected on what was important, and began with the projector and my desire to set it in motion. But when the projector was running, nothing came out of it but old ideas, the spider, God's lamb, all that dull old stuff."[24] Certainly much of this sequence is unmistakably a pastiche of references to earlier Bergman films: the silent farce is actually footage from *Prison,* the spider alludes to the spider-god of *Through a Glass Darkly* and *Winter Light,* the sheep entrails and knife to the mad animal-killer in *The Passion of Anna,* the crucifixion to *The Seventh Seal.*[25] And finally, and most obviously, the boy who appears at the beginning and end of the film appeared three years earlier in *The Silence* (even reading the same book in that film, Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time*).

Bergman has further claimed that the boy represents himself as author and that the scene with the boy alludes to his earliest work on the screenplay of *Persona* during a period of hospitalization. Even if we accept this clue, however, and agree to read the boy as a surrogate for Bergman, as many critics do, the effect is not to ground the subsequent fiction in a sense of immediate authorial presence, but rather, precisely the opposite, to dispossess the author of his own text. For the boy is presented from the very beginning as a fellow-interpreter, trying to make sense of images on a screen, as he was last seen in *The Silence* struggling to puzzle out the meaning of words in a foreign language. And an interpreter he remains to the very end, never even vaguely approaching the sort of authorial control that Fellini's surrogate, for instance, belatedly assumes at the end of *8½*. Whatever its origins, the scene with the boy, and for that matter the entire opening sequence, more obviously presents itself as an allegory of reception than of creation.

The eagerness of many critics to read this sequence as an authorial preface is perfectly understandable, though, since it seems to offer a further avenue along which the regressive search for interpretive grounds can be continued. If such grounds are unavailable within the text, then possibly they can be sought out in the authorial pre-text, in Bergman's stated or assumed intention, or in the evolving shape of his career. But ultimately there is simply no textual justification for privileging the authorial element in the opening sequence in this way. The sequence can serve as well, or better, to remind us that *Persona* is located, not just at a particular point in a particular authorial career, but rather at the intersection of the various histories of an art, an artist, a narrative mode, a cultural tradition, a technological apparatus, a physical event, and no one of these histories can claim any obvious priority over the others.

All of them are threads, among many others, drawn together in the textual web. This image of the web figures as prominently in the rhetoric of deconstructive criticism as that of the well-wrought urn once did in the "new criticism," the vision of the text as "a spatialized tapestry of interlocking threads (for example, words, images, characters, themes), . . .

constituted as level, meaning that no point or passage can rise above any other. Nothing can be privileged: there may be no origin, no end, no focus, no priority element, no sovereign principle."[26] And since there are no secrets hidden in or behind this web, since the secret, rather, is the web itself, "everything is to be *disentangled,*" as Barthes says, "nothing *deciphered;* the structure can be followed, 'run' (like the thread of a stocking) at every point and at every level, but there is nothing beneath . . ."[27]

In reality, of course, no reading of any text, whether interpretive *or* deconstructive, ever really manages to run the thread at *every* point and *every* level. The deconstructive reading will inevitably itself have an origin, an end, a priority element of sorts, even if it denies them to the text. But if it is to be consistent, whatever aspect of the text to which the deconstructive critic directs his attention, whichever loose thread he chooses to pull, must itself be denied any privileged status. In this instance, I began by appropriating the narrative action of *Persona* as a fiction of interpretation, an appropriation either justified or not by the possibilities it subsequently opened up. But defining Alma in the role of interpretant clearly no more exhausts her potential significance within the text than any of the various roles by which she seeks to define herself. Because the drama of interpretation is, of course, only one part of the larger drama played out along the diegetic axis of the film.

Exactly the same thing can be said of the drama played out along the affective axis as well. For the purposes of articles like this one, I assume a *persona* as clearly as Alma does. I call myself "the audience," "the viewer," "the critic," "the interpreter," or sometimes "we." As Alma in her role of nurse pretends to be motivated solely by solicitude for her patient, so I in my role of interpreter pretend to be motivated solely by disinterested curiosity about the text. "I'm Sister Alma," she says to Elizabeth, "I'm here to take care of you," "I'm Dr. Boyd," I say to the film, "I'm here to understand you." But as I sit in the dark and listen to Bibi Anderson describe an orgy on a beach, my mind is scarcely occupied wholly with problems of critical understanding. Other dramas are played out along both axes of the film, dramas of power and pleasure, as well as knowledge. Like any viewer of the film, I ("the audience," "the viewer," "the critic," "the interpreter") am not "an ideal spectator who comes to the film innocently cleansed of the contagion of other films and other practices," in John Caughie's words, but rather an amalgam of "subjects other than the purely textual subject—social subjects, sexual subjects, historical subjects—subjects who are constituted in a plurality of discourses (in an intertextuality of other texts) of which the single text is only one moment."[28]

Paradoxically, furthermore, it is only when these other subjects are permitted to come into play, when the interpreter ceases to be solely an interpreter, that he is enabled to make interpretive decisions at all. Not only enabled, in fact, but compelled. The stance of stringent scepticism and complete relativism adopted for the purposes of deconstructive analysis is necessarily a purely theoretical one. For "while relativism is a position that one can entertain," as Stanley Fish puts it, "it is not a position one can occupy. No one can *be* a relativist, because no one can achieve the distance from his own beliefs and assumptions that would result in their being no more authoritative *for him* than the beliefs and assumptions held by others, or, for that matter, the beliefs and assumptions he himself used to hold."[29]

In the real world, then, where real viewers watch real films, rather than the theoretical realm in which "the critic" engages "the text," there is never the slightest possibility of deconstructive criticism entailing an end to interpretation, not even for the deconstructive critic himself. The hermeneutic imperative *is* an imperative; the drama of interpretation goes on. But by exposing the inevitable absence of adequate grounds for interpretive choice within the text, deconstruction performs a necessary function within a larger and more ambitious critical project, by forcing us to a closer scrutiny of the real conditions (ideological, psychological, methodological) under which that complex drama is actually performed.

NOTES

1. Susan Sontag, "Against Interpretation," originally published in 1964, reprinted in *Against Interpretation* (New York: Dell, 1967), p. 14.

2. Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), Chap. 1.

3. Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference,* trans. by A. Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 280.

4. Barbara Johnson, "The Critical Difference," in Robert Young, ed., *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1980), p. 166.

5. Naomi Schor, "Fiction as Interpretation/Interpretation as Fiction," in Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Crosman, eds., *The Reader in the Text* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 168.

6. Schor, pp. 166, 177.

7. Schor, p. 170.

8. Shoshana Felman, "Turning the Screw of Interpretation," *Yale French Studies,* 55/56 (1977), p. 101.

9. Culler, xi.

10. Susan Sontag, *Styles of Radical Will* (New York: Farrar Strauss & Giroux, 1969), p. 129.

11. J. Hillis Miller, "Stevens' Rock and Criticism as Cure: II," *Georgia Review,* 30 (1976), p. 341.

12. John Simon, *Ingmar Bergman Directs* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1974), p. 259; Robin Wood, *Ingmar Bergman* (London: Studio Vista, p. 146; Birgitta Steene, *Ingmar Bergman* (Boston: Twayne, 1968), p. 116.

13. *Styles of Radical Will,* pp. 126–127.

14. Schor, p. 169.

15. Wood, p. 145.

16. Colin McCabe, "Realism in the Cinema: Notes on Some Brechtian Theses," *Screen,* 15, 2.

17. Alfred Guzzetti, "Christian Metz and the Semiology of the Cinema," in Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen, eds., *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings,* 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 195.

18. Wood, p. 155.

19. Culler, p. 180.

20. Cynthia Chase, "The Decomposition of the Elephants: Double-Reading *Daniel Deronda,*" *PMLA,* 93 (1978), pp. 217–218.

21. Simon, p. 274.

22. Chase, p. 137.

23. Culler, p. 66.

24. *Bergman on Bergman: Interviews with Ingmar Bergman* by S. Bjorkman, T. Manns, and J. Sisna, trans. by P. B. Austin (London: Secker & Warburg, 1973), pp. 198–199.

25. These references are enumerated by Simon, p. 230.

26. Vincent Leitch, "The Lateral Dance: The Deconstructive Criticism of J. Hillis Miller," *Critical Inquiry,* 6 (1980), pp. 602–603.

27. Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text,* trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), p. 147.

28. John Caughie, *Theories of Authorship* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), pp. 205–206.

29. Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text In This Class?* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980), p. 319.

DAVID PAUL and SYLVIA GLOVER

The Difficulty of Moral Choice: Zanussi's *Contract* and *The Constant Factor*

One of the unacknowledged ironies about Poland during the past decade and a half is that Krzysztof Zanussi's star rose simultaneously with that of Edward Gierek. One year after the release of Zanussi's first feature film, *The Structure of Crystals* (*Struktura krystalu,* 1969), Gierek became First Secretary of the Polish United Workers' (Communist) Party. There, however, the parallelism of these two careers ended. Gierek's rule, ushered in by violence in the Baltic shipyards, sputtered through ten years of intensifying economic and political problems before ending in disgrace amid the workers' movement of 1980. Meanwhile, Zanussi had been writing and directing films that, as the seventies wore on, probed gradually more and more deeply into the moral fabric of the society underlying Gierek's regime. What Zanussi found there—corruption, disillusionment, and a generally confused set of public values—was subtly but startingly depicted in his movies, particularly *Illumination* (*Iluminacja,* 1973) and *Camouflage* (*Barwy ochronne,* 1976).

In 1980, the year of Gierek's downfall and the abortive political "renewal," Zanussi completed two films that in many respects marked the culmination of his concern with the question of moral choice. *Contract* (*Kontrakt*), made for television and aired prior to the workers' strikes, hit hard at a theme the Solidarity unionists would later sound:

2. Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), Chap. 1.

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6. Schor, pp. 166, 177.

7. Schor, p. 170.

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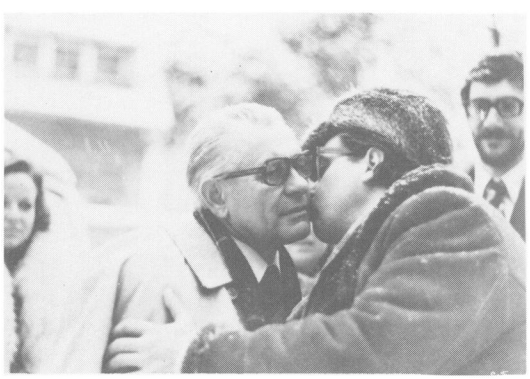
In 1980, the year of Gierek's downfall and the abortive political "renewal," Zanussi completed two films that in many respects marked the culmination of his concern with the question of moral choice. *Contract* (*Kontrakt*), made for television and aired prior to the workers' strikes, hit hard at a theme the Solidarity unionists would later sound:

the conspicuous consumption of a "socialist bourgeoisie" grown fat on the backs of the working class. *The Constant Factor* (*Constans*), released in the heat of the "renewal" process, extended Zanussi's focus to a broader sweep of philosophical questions, including the difficulty of constructing a morally consistent lifestyle within an immoral environment. Often correctly interpreted as criticisms of contemporary Poland,[1] the two films in fact beam their message to a far wider audience as well. At the risk of exaggerating their cultural significance, they might be seen together as a modern, secularized version of *Everyman,* for their lesson applies to all who would live rationally and virtuously.

On the surface, these films are vastly dissimilar. *Contract* is a comedy, albeit one with serious overtones, and its plot involves a dozen or so important characters. Both of these factors differentiate it from all previous Zanussi features as well as *The Constant Factor.* Up to the airing of *Contract,* Zanussi's audiences had come to expect sober and reflective tales centering on one or two principal characters. None of the earlier films was completely lacking in humor, but Zanussi's style—or so we thought—favored a dry, intellectual wit rather than the outrageous farcicality that characterizes *Contract.*

The setting of *Contract* is a misfired nuptial party. It is vaguely reminiscent of Robert Altman's *A Wedding* (which, incidentally, Zanussi did not like but which he admits inspired *Contract,* in part). *Contract*'s characters are quite shallow-minded and preoccupied with games of self-indulgence. In contrast to other Zanussi films, this one offers a lot of madcap action bound to hold the attention of even the most lowbrow audience:

CONTRACT



a bride who says "*nie*" (no) at the altar and runs out of the church, a band of young ballet dancers cavorting naked in the sauna and the snow, a mysterious series of thefts among the carefully chosen wedding guests, and a spectacular house fire set by the drunken and deranged groom.

In a sense, *Contract* seems to have heralded a new phase in Zanussi's creative ambitions. Though not his first television movie, it reaches out to a wider audience than his earlier media efforts (among them: *Face to Face,* 1968; *Behind the Wall,* 1971; and the West German production *Wege in der Nacht,* 1979). With its surface lightness and an international cast that includes a fine performance by Leslie Caron, *Contract* reflects Zanussi's outward-looking artistic aspirations in the eighties. It announces the director's effort to cater more directly to the mass international audience. Zanussi himself guessed in 1980 that, for him, international coproductions were the wave of the future, and he has ever since been more active outside Poland than within. He has completed a film based on the life of Pope John Paul II, produced by CBS and the Italian RAI, and he has been involved in several more projects involving French and West German companies.[2]

The Constant Factor, on the other hand, is more in tune with the earlier Zanussi. It focuses on one main protagonist and his efforts to make his way through a frustrating world. Stylistically, *The Constant Factor* more closely resembles Zanussi's films of the seventies, in which the director relied heavily on dialogue and pictorial symbolism to hold together a slow-paced plot. There is some action and even a touch of violence, but these elements are reserved for special moments, understated, and employed pointedly to confirm the intellectual argument running through the center of the film. It is a thinking person's film in the finest Zanussi mold, challenging its viewers to reconsider their notions of right and wrong. *The Constant Factor* is a morality play, but not one in the tritely "moralistic" sense, for it takes a few complicated twists that illuminate the complexity of moral choices in modern life.

Is it possible to live a life of moral consistency? This question is asked in nearly all of

Dorota (Maya Komorowska), Penelope (Leslie Caron), Piotr (Krzysztof Kolberger): CONTRACT

Zanussi's films. Zanussi often juxtaposes contrasting character types between or among whose lifestyles we might hope to choose. In *Camouflage,* for example, the two protagonists are a middle-aged docent whose cynicism is appalling but, alas, disquietingly persuasive, and a young magister whose strong sense of scholarly integrity is put to the test and found tragically unfitted to the jungle of academia. In *The Constant Factor,* a virtuous young man named Witek faces virtually an entire world of scoundrels. Occupying a privileged position in the glamorous field of international trade, Witek hews to a simon-pure business ethic while his colleagues and bosses casually pad their expense accounts and sell uninventoried state equipment for personal gain. Witek does not blow the whistle on them, but by simply not playing their game he jeopardizes it and brings their enmity down upon himself. It quickly becomes obvious that he cannot survive in their world.

Zanussi's young protagonist, played by Tadeusz Bradecki, effectively compels our empathy. If we are tempted to identify with him completely, however, we are sharply reminded that the choices are not easy. Witek does not fully recognize the constraints under which he must function; he must learn that in his world, the supreme purpose is to survive among fellow creatures who conceal their predatory natures beneath civilized mannerisms (a lesson that continues the central point of *Camouflage*). Nor is it clear that Witek knows exactly what he wants, and the constant factor that he hopes will guide his behavior turns out to be an elusive abstraction.

Little by little, Witek gets caught up in a superhuman quest to understand the meaning of life enroute to an inevitable death. He turns eventually to mathematics, much as Franciszek in *Illumination* placed his faith in physics, but learns that no equation will comprehend all the perplexing experiences that make up his world—his father's accidental death on a Himalayan expedition, his mother's agonizing death by cancer, a small child's death that he himself inadvertently causes, and other mysteries in the bewildering life Witek lives amidst all these reminders of his own ultimate fate.

Witek's world is thus hopelessly complex and confusing. *The Constant Factor* is an ambitious film that plunges into several big issues at once. It is about life and death, honesty and corruption, personal happiness and social responsibility. Having taken on such a weighty chunk of material, Zanussi at times evidences some of his characters' difficulties, and the subject matter almost gets out of hand. The film is not as smoothly crafted as *Camouflage,* a seamless movie that

deals with a more limited set of philosophical questions.

The Constant Factor is nevertheless a worthy offering from this brainy auteur (who always writes his own scripts), and Zanussi never quite loses his control despite the complexity of the subject matter. To manage his material, Zanussi calls upon an impressive array of stylistic tricks. Death and fascination with death are portrayed through vivid close-ups. We become more than just witnesses as Witek's mother slowly loses her life. The cremation of a Hindu woman, filmed in India, reveals how rituals feed our fascination with death. Back among the living, we see the marginality of the individual who would swim against the powerful stream of human corruption, for at critical moments Witek is shown at the edge of the frame in isolation from his co-workers. Witek's peers wreak a sickening vengeance on him by hiding contraband foreign currency in his belongings as he passes through customs; when he is caught, we share his palpable claustrophobia as the customs officer backs him menacingly into the corner of a narrow room.

The antagonistic natural world, too, seems to design its specific torments for Witek. Repeatedly, the camera makes long pans through the Himalayas, peaks whose majesty and treachery symbolize elements of allure, challenge, power, serenity, and death so intertwined in Witek's psyche that they cannot be untangled. As Witek's personal and professional life deteriorates, we see numerous short takes of increasing rapidity indicating that he cannot reconcile himself to the cruelties of the natural world, which are recreated in the social world of his work. Quick cuts connect Witek's workplace, the hospital where his

THE CONSTANT FACTOR

THE CONSTANT FACTOR

mother is suffering, the church where Witek unsuccessfully seeks solace, and the mourning room in which his now-deceased mother reposes. We sense that Witek is losing control, an impression that is confirmed when he admits to a close friend that he feels he has "come unstuck."

Zanussi also makes startling use of light and color tone to bring out the ironies of Witek's personal journey. The most important moments are bathed in luminosity. All of the unfortunate events that befall Witek take place in cheerful sunlight or under more-than-adequate interior lighting: his troubles on the job, his arrest at the airport, the accidental death of the child playing beneath his scaffold. The decline and death of Witek's mother are garishly illuminated, and the symbolically destructive mountains which killed his father and hold the lure of death for Witek himself are shown in a dazzling glare. Much of the film is shot during wintertime, on sunny days against bright snow. The ironic effect of all this light enveloping "dark" events is to draw us into the protagonist's own confusion. How are we to know right from wrong, enlightenment from benightedness?

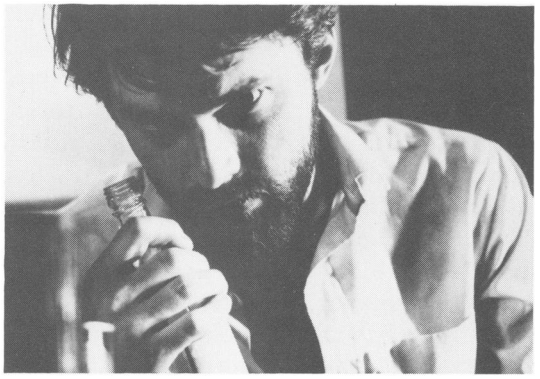
In Zanussi films, no judgment is simple. Characters are never as uncomplicated as they seem at first, and their dilemmas cannot be resolved by a sheer act of will power. Witek takes up where earlier Zanussi protagonists left off—Jaroslaw in *Camouflage,* Franciszek in *Illumination,* Marta in *Quarterly Balance* (*Bilans kwartalny,* 1974), Jan in *The Structure of Crystals*—but, like them, he fails to achieve a happy balance. The young men's *Angst* (and that of Marta in *Quarterly Balance*) may or may not give way to the corruption, conformity, and survivalism of those around

them. We in the audience are left uneasy, yearning for a Hollywood ending that would dissolve the ambiguity and send us home knowing that all—or at least some—lived happily ever after. Such an ending would be wholly out of character for Krzysztof Zanussi. And that brings us to *Contract,* a funny movie with an unfunny conclusion.

Contract shows some signs of its having been made for television. Compared to *The Constant Factor* and earlier Zanussi films, the didacticism is much more subtle, the moral lesson more cleverly driven home. The pace of *Contract* is relatively fast. It was consciously designed to capture a large but atomized audience of people watching in their own living rooms, in competition with all the normal distractions of home and family.

Yet it is an artful film that rewards careful attention. Typically, Zanussi has framed his scenes with great care. The characters are rarely alone, and crowded frames tell us that we are watching a study of cosmopolitan group behavior. When we do see people alone, we are alerted that something quite significant is happening. The major themes, however, are developed through the composition of the crowded frames. Older and younger generations are frequently shown in close interaction, illustrating the fact that their values and lifestyles overlap more than they conflict. Despite apparent differences, real conflicts of ethical standards do not correlate with generational identity except for the case of the aged nanny who senses that her traditional values are out of place. The other two generations are much closer to each other than any would like to admit; whether shown together or separate, the young display the same propensities to status-seeking and influence-buying as their parents.

The wedding that forms the center of the plot is a comically mixed-up affair. In the first place, true to the conventions of their generation, the bride (Lilka) and groom (Piotr) have been living together for some time already. Lilka's desire to stay in touch with tradition drives her to pull the reluctant Piotr before a priest to arrange for a church ceremony following the civil ceremony. Thus, when Lilka runs out in the middle of their religious rites, she does so as a woman already lawfully wed. The guests, in some confusion as to whether or not the marriage had actually taken place, quickly overcome their discomfort and settle into the serious frivolities of the reception.



CONTRACT

The post-nuptial party takes place at the sumptuous villa of the groom's father, a physician enriched by private fees illegally collected from his choice patients. It is no match for the legendarily festive three-day Polish traditional weddings like that depicted in Andrzej Wajda's *The Wedding* (*Wesele,* 1972), but what it lacks in exuberance it makes up for in ostentation. The guests include Lilka's grumpy father, another member of the semilegitimately *nouveau riche,* who not only disliked the idea of a church wedding from the start but seems generally envious of Piotr's higher-status father. Others in the assembled party include Piotr's forlorn mother and his younger stepmother; a snooty foreign aunt named Penelope (played by Caron) who was once a renowned ballerina, and her snotty postpubescent daughter Patricia (Christine Paul-Podleski); a Polish step-aunt who is having an affair with a married Swede; and the previously mentioned dancers from the local ballet company. On the margins of this throng are the disapproving old nanny and a slovenly housemaid.

In the midst of the celebration, guests notice that their valuables have been stolen. The thefts are tracked to the embarrassed Penelope, whose carefully practiced hauteur is destroyed by the revelation of her kleptomania. At almost the same moment, Patricia is discovered in the bathtub with a fellow she picked up downtown. Later, the party takes a recess and goes for a merry sleighride, returning only to find that the abandoned

bridegroom has turned into a raving pyromaniac. Luckily, the fire is confined to the kitchen. With great dispatch, Piotr is confined to the wagon that will carry him off to an institution. As he is hauled off, Lilka at last returns, wandering without a coat through the snow. In the final scenes she is comforted, sort of, by the only member of the middle-aged set who has appeared composed and caring throughout the whole affair, Piotr's stepmother Dorota (Maja Komorowska). The film ends with the two women walking through the quiet woods and suddenly viewing a large stag, a magnificent symbol of serenity in a world quite apart from the cacophonous frippery of human society.

Zanussi's role as social critic thus asserts itself in this amusing farce. At the heart of *Contract* is the same serious theme that the director explored more openly in his earlier movies: moral decision-making. in *Contract,* an entire community of people displays its confusion about morality, yet the group ultimately breaks down into individuals who do have some moral sensitivity.

At least, some of them do. And for them, moral decision-making must be done alone, for the crowd will not permit or respect the act. Piotr is perhaps the most confused of all. Heretofore, he has made a big show of disdain for his father's privileged status, but he drives Lilka away by reversing his position and deciding to accept his father's help in securing their future. Lilka's flight, however, drives him to despair and, bewildered, he lashes out by himself at the most tangible symbol of his society's confused values: his father's house.

Others who confront moral issues similarly do so in isolation. Penelope, in shame following the discovery of her thefts, removes herself and her guilt to the bathroom. The nanny, offended to tears by all the goings-on, recognizes her isolation from these people and goes through the motions of moving out (though we see her later, lurking around just outside).

Lilka's act of rebellion before the altar is another lonely moment of decision. Misgivings well up within her, triggered no doubt by Piotr's moral turnabout. This is her last chance to break away from all the hypocrisy and rethink her life. Thus driven by her conscience from the confused society around her, she takes off by herself and is not seen again until the end of the story.

CONTRACT

When Lilka finally straggles back and then goes off into the woods with Dorota, the film abruptly leaves human society behind and enters the world of nature. And here is where one of Zanussi's favorite leitmotifs comes to the forefront of this grand farce. Nature is symbolically important in Zanussi's films. It is often depicted romantically as the place where purity, goodness, and strength reside. However, it can also be deadly, as in *The Constant Factor.* It is seductively beautiful and thrilling, but it is mystifying. The mountains that swallowed up Witek's father are awe-inspiring, and they contain within them an inexpressible truth about Witek's destiny.

Contract begins and ends with scenes thrusting humans awkwardly into nature. In the opening scene, the old nanny is out feeding semi-wild animals in the snow when along comes a noisy party of horseback riders. The wild animals are frightened off: people who are preoccupied with their own "civilized" self-indulgence have spoiled the day for that poor old obsolete soul who was simply trying to make contact with nature. From here, we are taken immediately into the disorderly environment of the human beings, where we remain until the final scene. The only other references to the animal world are shots of the family dogs and one glimpse of a pathetic deer confined unnaturally on the grounds of the villa.

At the finale, Lilka and Dorota are filled with wonder at the sight of the stag in the forest, and they are staring at it in silence as the screen goes dark. The stag, a simple and gentle beast, offers an example of life removed from pettiness and wasteful extravagance. The effect of this scene is breathtaking, and

it puts the movie into a perfect symmetry as the endless folly of the humanfolk is framed between two idyllic references to the wild.

Nature thus provides an alternative world from which humans might draw some lessons about how to live. They do not, however; or when they do, they draw lessons that are not especially helpful or elevating (for example, Jakub in *Camouflage,* who misuses nature to document his Social Darwinist philosophy). More often than not, humans' interaction with nature results in tremendous mischief.

Nature has a way of playing tricks on those who would bring it under their control. Witek never makes it to the Himalayas by the end of *The Constant Factor,* but he ends up working on a scaffold which must now take the place of the natural heights to which he aspires. It is here that the natural force of gravity guides the heavy chunk of masonry his pick has dislodged, downward onto the little child below. Analogously, *Contract*'s Piotr unleashes the natural energy of fire but does not thereby end his agony. Rather, he gets himself committed to an asylum, with safe transit guaranteed by Daddy's cash.

Distanced from nature, men design games that in many ways define their very humanness but also complicate their survival by rendering their competitions with each other hard to predict. *The Constant Factor* is full of references to games—literal games such as darts, dice, slot machines, and roulette, and figurative games in which Witek takes on the overwhelming opposition represented by public depravity and private mortality. Witek's games challenge fate, and so do those played by Piotr, Lilka, and Penelope in *Contract.* Then there are society's games, the most prominent form of play featured in *Contract:* social climbing, ostentation, one-upsmanship. We hear an allusion to political games in a conversation between the fathers of the bride and groom, who discover they have more in common than they had imagined: "Democracy is all very well, but somebody has to run things."

The gameplaying clues us in to the complexity of the films' characters, and to the ambiguity of the moral questions they confront. Piotr and Lilka are not really so far removed from the corruption of their fathers. In making arrangements with a young priest about the church wedding, Lilka is perfectly willing to fudge the truth about the nature of the marriage that will supposedly result from the sacred rites, whereas Piotr can hardly be restrained from blurting out the truth: that they plan to have no children, intend to practice birth control in ways unsanctioned by the church, and so on. Yet it is Piotr who shows his corruptibility later, for he finds the power of his father's social influence irresistible; if Piotr is to have a lucrative career and the newlyweds a private apartment, he must rely on his father's connections. Thus is Lilka persuaded, in a belated role reversal, to rebel against the hypocrisy that has crept into their vulnerable young lives.

Witek is Zanussi's most heartbreaking example of a young idealist whose genuine desire to live a moral life is repeatedly frustrated. *The Constant Factor* is a sobering tribute to the obduracy of our environment, for Witek, having lost his cushy job in international marketing, is sentenced to menial labor. In the film's final irony, even this forced retreat into what seems an ethically neutral job does not save him from responsibility, as he learns when he becomes the cause of an innocent child's death. But wait a minute—was Witek himself so perfect? Did he not, earlier in the story, get that first job through connections arranged by the mountaineering buddies of his deceased father? That such behavior is commonplace does not exempt it from a rather harsh judgment if we apply Witek's uncompromising standards. Once again, Zanussi has left us with unanswered questions.

Late in the game, a humbled Witek is taught an enigmatic lesson by a wise mathematics professor: there may exist a simple equation which leads to a superficially correct solution, but if the problem contains a large number of variables, the simple solution will not suffice. Mathematics, Witek learns, offers certain more elegant equations to solve complex problems—but life does not necessarily follow the rules of mathematics, and the abstract principles governing the science of numbers cannot free human beings from the awesome responsibility of making nonquantifiable decisions.

What *The Constant Factor* does by centering on one character, *Contract* does with a

scatter-gun approach. In *Contract,* the human variables are obviously too numerous to be comprehended by any abstract equations, and searching for a constant factor is irrelevant. Piotr and Lilka cannot be consistent in their repudiation of social conventions. The symbolic breakup of their fresh young marriage reveals problems in the broader community, and we see these problems acted out in the behavior of the wedding guests.

Affluence does not protect the rich against emotional hardship. Corruption breeds itself into acceptability and becomes perversely normative. To deal with the resulting moral chaos, people play games that grow ever more intricate. Thus, the wedding guests think nothing of black marketeering and influence peddling, they scarcely discriminate between the innocent nudity of the ballet troupe and the promiscuity of Patricia, and they accept the scandalous behavior of Penelope as an expected quirk on the part of a stupid foreigner. Completely forgotten is the wedding, the contract, that brought them together for all their carryings-on. When the bride and groom eventually make their separate returns to the group, their unhappy reappearance is quite out of place; it disturbs the fun of the party—though, it is implied, only momentarily. The unfunny ending thus brings the central message of *Contract* into focus, linking this comic farce with Zanussi's more "serious" films.

Zanussi's reputation now reaches far beyond the borders of Poland. This by no means diminishes his special role as a critic of his own society.[3] In *Contract,* he unmasks the injustice and hypocrisy attending private wealth within a supposedly collectivistic-egalitarian community. In *The Constant Factor,* the instances of corruption and greed that are depicted are quite specific to Eastern Europe: even physicians, poorly salaried in comparison to their Western counterparts, expect illegal payoffs in return for decent care. Yet it takes no great stretching of the Western viewer's imagination to relate to Zanussi's scenarios. We, too, are greedy, obsessed by our positions on the social ladder, fascinated and horrified by death, and awash in a sea of moral uncertainty. Like his more famous countryman Wajda, Zanussi has plumbed the specific realities of Polish culture and, in so doing, shown us something profound about ourselves.[4]

Disturbingly, Zanussi questions the notions of personal efficacy by which most of us live. We believe that meaningful choices about life can and must be made, and we would like to think that our own choices can be at once moral and functional. Above all, we do not like to think that we cannot really chart our own course, distinguishing for ourselves right and wrong, truth and falsehood. In an unusual interview contained within the movie of another Polish director, Krzysztof Kieslowski's *Camera Buff* (*Amator,* 1979), Zanussi expressed his concern about how hard it is for an honest man to make his way through a world in which there might not be any ascertainable objective truths. Zanussi's anxious young men and women confuse themselves, sometimes irremediably, by assuming they can comprehend the incomprehensible.

Perhaps the defining comment of Zanussi's work is that a virtuous and satisfying life is difficult to construct and, once put together, fragile. Witek, Piotr, and Lilka try to base their behavior on a principle, but their solutions turn out to be simplistic and dysfunctional amidst the complexity of natural processes.

We can only guess at the direction of natural processes, but if we are to preserve those crucial elements that distinguish us as human, we dare not give up hope of controlling our own choices. The dilemmas remain, fraught with contradictions: can we compromise in order to survive and yet maintain a semblance of morality? or, to turn that around, can we consciously build a personal moral structure without destroying that structure through the public compromises we are forced to make? Life may appear to be a no-win game complicated by subconscious motives and environmental constraints; but humans, perhaps through some instinctual urge just as strong as survival, must still make enlightened decisions about how to live. It is Zanussi, more than anyone else in the contemporary Polish cinema, who delineates the contours of these human choices.

NOTES

1. One of the present authors attended the opening of *The Constant Factor* in Cracow in September, 1980. At that time of

political upheaval and social introspection, Zanussi's Polish audience responded to the film with an outpouring of enthusiasm.

2. See J.R. Keith Keller's interview with Zanussi in *Variety,* vol. 300 no. 7 (September 17, 1980), p. 50.

3. Nor has this role been without its dangers in Communist-ruled Poland. *Camouflage* was officially criticized soon after its release, and Zanussi was harassed during several public appearances in which he discussed the film with his audience.

4. For a brilliant discussion of Wajda and his intimate connections to Polish culture, see Boleslaw Michalek, "Andrzej Wajda's Vision of One Country's Past and Present," in *Politics, Art and Commitment in The East European Cinema,* ed. David W. Paul (London: Macmillan, and New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983), pp. 169-88.

MIECZYSŁAW SZPORER

Andrzej Wajda's Reign of Terror: Danton's Polish Ambiance

Andrzej Wajda, almost from the beginning of his long film and theater career, has found himself on the periphery of ideology and the center of political controversy. This intransigence, which always irked the Polish communist leaders, Gomułka, Gierek, Kania, and now General Jaruzelski, has earned Wajda the title of popular spokesman for the Polish national conscience. In the words of Polish actor Andrzej Seweryn: "Wojtyła, Wałesa, Wajda, that would be, the Pope, Saint Peter and Saint Paul." *Danton,* Wajda's first film made after the imposition of the martial law in Poland, widely promoted by the French Ministry of Culture, has now perplexed the French left. In fact, Wajda's *Danton* was this year's most controversial film in Paris, awarded the Prix Delluc as well as a César (French Oscar) for best director. Unlike *Man of Iron,* shot in *cinéma vérité* style and celebrating the triumph of Solidarity, *Danton* does not let history speak for itself but dramatizes it. Wajda forces us to look closely at the human consequences of ideological decisions.

The French reaction to *Danton* contrasts with the film's muted reception in Poland.

Depardieu as Danton, hailed by his followers after a speech

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Actually the film's troubles began on December 12, 1981, when martial law was declared. Film Polski, the coproducer of the film, did not allow Wajda to film crowd scenes in Craców fearing demonstrations. *Danton* finally opened in Paris in January and in Waraw in March. But in Poland, it was hardly promoted or reviewed. This is not to say that it was lost on Polish audiences. The June issue of *Kino* magazine listed it as one of the most widely viewed films in the Warsaw region. The loud political reaction to the film in France may have been self-serving. A Socialist majority in power, confronted with difficult economic choices, a tense political situation, and falling popularity in the polls, still has to maintain close ties with the Communist Party which sees Robespierre as its precursor. The Left has accused Wajda's film, which portrays Georges Danton as a victim of political persecution manipulated by Robespierre, of distorting French revolutionary history. François Mitterand, apparently dissatisfied, is said to have made a hasty exit from the film première at the Cinémathèque Française. *Danton* upset revolutionary mythology. The political argument undoubtedly runs deeper than political ideology with the French Left seeing itself as the legitimate heir of the crowds that stormed the Bastille in 1789.

The politicians have generally assumed the usual line about the Reign of Terror: (1) the purge of the "indulgent" Dantonists, from November 1793 until their execution, April 5, 1794, followed the purge of the "extremist" Hébertists executed March 24; (2) the terror applied against the extremes was necessary (or at least justified), because the revolutionary republic was threatened from within by counter-revolutionaries and from without by foreign intervention; (3) Danton's financial dealings were suspect and he may have been paid off by the royalists. Briefly, Wajda's *Danton* does not tell the whole story. It reduces a complex historical situation to a personal vendetta. Concentrating on the personal rivalry between Danton and Robespierre, it omits, for example, any reference to the guillotining of Hébert, the leader of the *sans culottes,* executed a week earlier, which is curious since Danton, as Minister of Justice, had a hand in the terror.

Hence, Louis Mermaz, the Socialist president of the National Assembly, interviewed in *Le Monde* (January 16–17, 1983), while insisting that Wajda's film "lacks historical depth," also underscored that political violence is not a reality in present-day France because the revolution has already taken place. The "revisionist" historians, notably François Furet in *Libération* (January 17, 1983), have rallied to Wajda's defense. What has to be underscored is that Wajda's *Danton,* in spite of all the criticism, is a well researched film, especially when it is compared with other, historically more dubious adaptations of the Danton Affair. It is hardly antirevolutionary like Dimitri Buchovetzky's *Danton* (1921) or an ideologically questionable sentimentalization like D. W. Griffith's *Orphans of the Storm* (1921) which transformed Danton into an iconic figure who saves an innocent orphan from the guillotine.

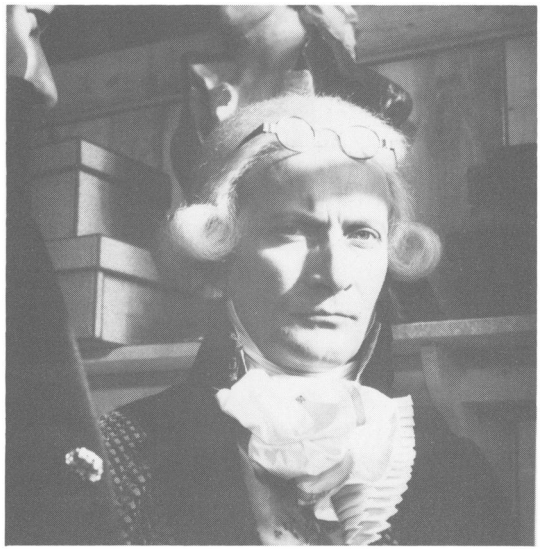
The film critics generally, taking their cue from *Cahiers du Cinéma* (January, 1983), have sensed in *Danton* a certain "Polish ambiance." This, in turn, provoked Wajda's response in an interview in *Le Monde* (January 6, 1983): "Danton is not Lech Wałesa and Robespierre is not Jaruzelski." But I believe that the criticism of Wajda's film in France does not itself transcend current history. *Danton* deals with the institutionalization of the revolutionary process and is really about sacrificing history for the sake of ideology. It is about leaders, men, who rationalize their actions socially and intellectually, but who are in fact incapable of being reasonable and of acting sensibly. The reaction of the French Left to *Danton* indicates a profound, and if I may say so, a personal anxiety about the cultural role of the Left and, even more importantly, about the inability of the Left to break out of the institutional constraints even when in power.

Revolutions turn to terror, lose themselves when they reflect on themselves. The political message was not all that different in Wajda's *Man of Marble,* which even the French Communist Party organ *Humanité* praised. The message is simply harder to take when it hits home. And it is always easier to sentimentalize about the past. Wajda's *Danton* does have a certain "Polish ambiance," inasmuch as the film, like Solidarity, returns us to the historical dilemmas of modern revolution which

began in 1789 in France and reemerged in 1917 in Russia. Andrzej Wajda has admitted, on several occasions, that he has been profoundly affected by the martial law and that it has influenced his interpretation of the Danton affair. What he has rejected repeatedly are the simplistic equations that, in effect, abuse the complex political dilemmas which his film—and indeed the Polish situation—raise especially for the Left. The oversimplified "Polish connection" may well be the result of an overzealous concurrency with history or, more likely, is caused by an ideological myopia—a preference for a formula to explain the confusion about what has actually taken place in Poland or what is about to take place there. Hence, the obvious logic: (1) Wajda, a Solidarity militant, after *Man of Iron* (which even Lech Wałesa thought radical), takes up the Danton affair, the event that inaugurated the Reign of Terror; (2) Wajda rewrites the 1929 pro-Robespierre play by Stanisława Przybyszewska which he staged in 1981 at the Gdańsk shipyards; (3) therefore, he is making a political statement for Polish consumption in the seeming aftermath of Solidarity. Or allegorically: the "Polish Eisenstein" follows up his *October* with his *Ivan the Terrible.*

The purge of the Dantonists has been a common enough example of the "dialectical" practice of revolutionary terror. It has been used by Communist Party ideologists to justify Stalinist purges and it has also served as the historical paradigm of political repression by the Left. Perhaps Wajda does not explicitly refer to the purge of the Hébertists so as to exclude the possibility of such "dialectical" rationalizations of his film. What makes *Danton* a controversial film is that, as far as historical films go, it is remarkably accurate in its rendition of the historical personalities of Danton and Robespierre. Wajda selects events critically, even invents some events, to accentuate the human dimension of the ideological conflict—to expose the interiority of history. "A good historical film," he observed in an interview in *Télérama* (January 8–14), "should reveal the psyche of the people of the epoch. How did they behave? What motivated them?"

Wajda's psychological portrait of the revolutionary milieu, for all its stark realism, haunts us like a nightmare. It deliberately



Wojciech Pszoniak as Robespierre

refers itself to the classical naturalism of the paintings of Jacques-Louis David, the chief visual propagandist of the French Revolution, who magnified the sacrifices of the Great Terror. Wajda's film opens with Danton's return to the capital, November 17, 1793, to avert further massacres: macabre color contrasts, checkpoint manned by revolutionary guards, suspicion everywhere and tense atmosphere expressed visually, night then cold light of dawn, hands warming themselves over a cauldron in the street, the sinister silhouette of the guillotine in the freezing rain, a close-up of Danton's pensive face. The film alternates between the personal and the social; and it seems to want to equate the affective and the reflective sides of human character. The conflicts reveal themselves in nearly subliminal inserts that deform by augmenting the purely mental: a poster of a revolutionary nun exposing her breasts, naked feet of a spectator against the iron grill of the gate of the Palace of Justice, cropped hair of the condemned swept away by a foot in a wooden clog, the blood-soaked wicker basket for the heads of the victims, etc.

We can ask whether Wadja's Danton, in spite of his personal excesses and lavish tastes and in spite of (if we think like Robespierre) his apparent bourgeois self-indulgence, does not, at the same time, speak for the extreme Left—when, for example, at his trial, he turns his back to the revolutionary tribunal, refuses to acknowledge its authority, and demands

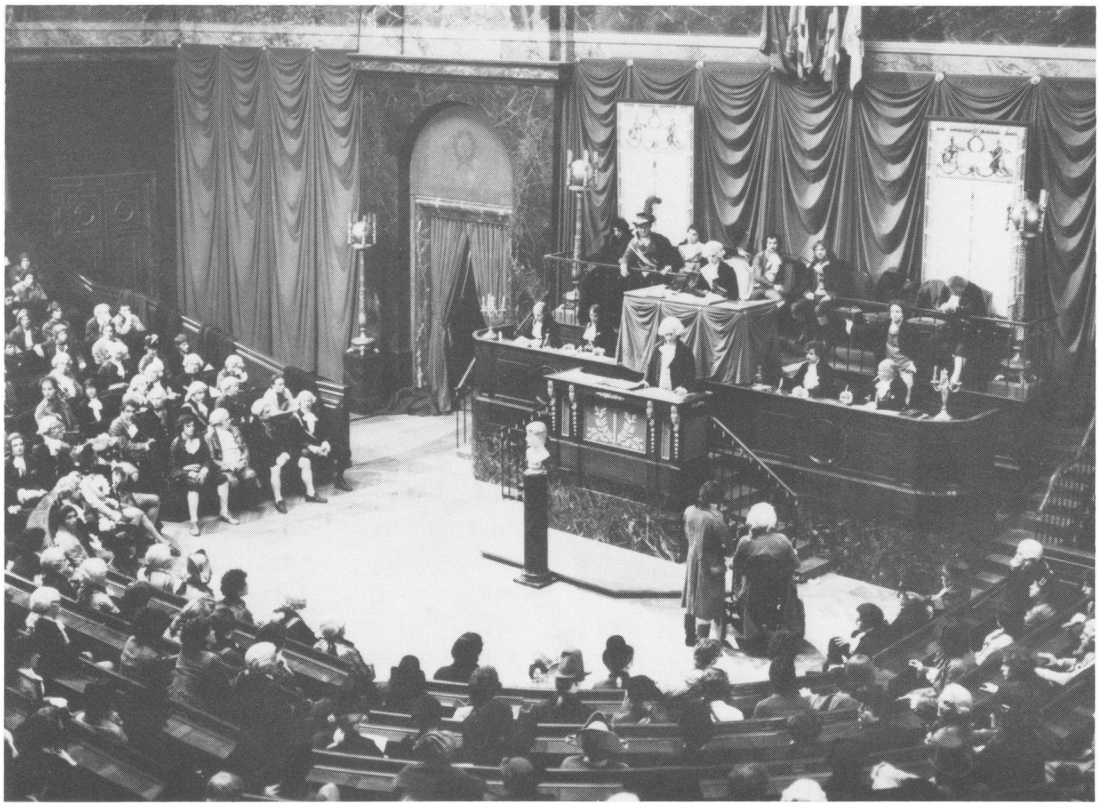
that the people judge him because they are the only revolutionary authority; or when he contests the legitimacy of leadership that has bureaucratized the process of justice and hides behind empty procedures while not allowing the accused to confront those who accuse him and not giving him a chance to defend himself openly; or when he proposes that the leadership itself is counter-revolutionary and conspires against the people when it condemns him, the people's tribune, to death for mere insubordination ("People of France, the criminal is you!"). Or does Wajda's *Danton* mean to demonstrate the futility of individualist intransigence as well as the historical vulnerability of the "hoarse" voice of the people's tribune that struggles to convince the people to lead themselves?

Gérard Depardieu as Danton echoes the personal ambiguity of the earlier Dantons: Georg Büchner's solitary individualist suffering from existential angst in the midst of an incomprehensible apocalypse and Romain Rolland's *bon vivant* opposed to puritanical hypocrisy and violence. Depardieu said of Danton: "When he is alone, he knows that his head is going to be off . . . When he felt the severity of Robespierre, he wanted to touch him but he did not know how." Danton and Robespierre (played by Wojciech Pszoniak) talk past each other, an incomprehensibility no doubt accentuated by the fact that Wajda's actors spoke different languages dividing along ideological lines, the Dantonists French and the Robespierrists Polish. However, it seems to me really misleading to see this film as a confrontation of Western democratic aspirations and the state-supervised political apparatus of the Eastern Bloc.

Danton operates at the gut level of ideological confrontation. Like other modern dramatizations of the French Revolution, notably Peter Weiss's *Marat/Sade,* Wajda's film looks at the psychological contradictions, at the personal conflicts, that superimpose themselves on presumably social decisions of revolutionary leaders. And, by the same token, it questions the ideological compulsion, and indeed the revolutionary legitimacy, of those individuals who act in the name of the revolution. Wajda is interested in the character of social fascism, in the personal equations: I am the revolution, I am the state, I am the people. By contrast with his earlier apolitical films, *The Ladies of Wilko* and *Birchwood,* in *Danton* existential angst and psychological development of character become somewhat paradoxically a means of social criticism. Wajda resorts to these motifs to point out the limitations of the perspective that reduces human experience to "social determination" which in "post-Marxist" Poland has often been used as the reason to justify oppression.

Hence, *Danton* politically illuminates the conflicts of Wajda's earlier films—the incongruity between the detached intellect and the authentically human experience that makes personal integrity not possible, in *Ashes and Diamonds* for example. Robespierre is neither evil nor Machiavellian; he is a divided self. How else can one make sense out of the seemingly contradictory historical personality who first opposed capital punishment and then presided over the Reign of Terror in which more than forty thousands lives were lost? "Virtue is impotent without terror," the "incorruptible" Robespierre claimed. For a man who was incapable of being close to anyone and who seemed to have envied those who were, for a man who had no real friends, terror "for the sacred love of humanity" became, as Wajda seems to suggest, a form of emotional (and perhaps even sexual) relief.

What for Robespierre is an "intellectual dilemma" is for Danton a "personal duel." Danton tells Robespierre that he thinks of the people as if they were heroes in a novel, that he raises people so high up that it is impossible for them to breathe. The confrontation between "story" and "history," between the intellect and the senses, is potentially a violent one. In *Danton* it ends in fratricide. Aloof-mannered, Robespierre subordinates the movements of his body to the narrow course defined by his palms when he speaks. The revolution demands personal sacrifice and it will stay on its course no matter what it costs him. Vast-framed Danton, arms wide open, embraces the people—and the people embrace Danton. The people, however, do not conduct the revolution or control the Terror. The people are powerless, pushed into the background, behind the balustrade of the court room or out the door, closed off from events. The masses are the spectators of history. How is it, we ask, that a crowd obviously moved



Robespierre addressing the Revolutionary Tribunal

by the impassioned appeals for gut-level justice, convinced of the innocence of the condemned—a leader whom they idolize—allows him to be guillotined? To act they would have to be willing to assume their own authority, risk their lives. But they have been worn down by the changes and they have been made to fear because of the recantations, the forced confessions, the random arrests, the Terror.

Whether out of fear or out of envy or out of political need to legitimate its actions, Robespierre's revolution can no longer tolerate dissent or accommodate the exception such as the people's aristocrat Danton. Everyone must toe the line. Insistence on ideological conformity and on revolutionary discipline was characteristic of the historical Robespierre, which is what made him a precursor of Lenin. "We have no more privileges here and no more idols." Although the real Danton was probably an opportunist, his popular appeal in France even today reflects genuine aspiration for freedom which is more fundamental than that sanctioned by the law. Wajda's film builds on the opposition of Danton to Robespierre. Danton could have taken power by force. "It is necessary to strike," his friends counsel him. "It is necessary to stay calm," Danton responds. "You should defend yourself," Camille Desmoulins tells him before their arrest, "you have the power of the people behind you." Danton simply nods. In effect, he is offered the choice that Robespierre takes, but he refuses it.

Is Danton's decision not to act forcefully the result of his opposition to more violence, another purge, more revolutionary committees that look out for public good? Or is it motivated by some principle that he must see through to the end—a political belief in the "spontaneous activity of the masses" who alone by their action legitimate political authority, a personal demand that all should cultivate their individuality and fend for themselves? Or is Danton simply wishing to be left alone—tired of it all? If Wajda's film is about making a wrong political move that affects the course of history then who errs? Is it Danton in not taking power by force when he knew that the revolution was threatened? Or is it Robespierre in acting in the name of the revolution? "The revolution has taken the wrong

course," he feverishly exclaims to Saint Just (Bolesław Linda) who comes to congratulate him on his victory.

Robespierre's modest "family life" at the Duplay household provides psychological depth but, in itself, has little historical substance. We know that the execution of Danton, his political rival, and of Camille Desmoulins, his schoolmate at the College of Saint Louis Le Grand, affected him personally. Robespierre never married, never was known to have had a mistress or even a love affair. Citizen Eleonore Duplay (Anne Alvaro) could be mistaken in the film for the "dutiful wife." In fact, she is always the faithful and the obedient servant of the revolution personified, for her, in Robespierre. She disciplines her idolizing servant and trains her younger brother to be a "good revolutionary" by making him recite the Declaration of the Rights of Man. The Spartan atmosphere at the Duplay house contrasts with the romanticism of Camille and Lucile Desmoulins (Patrice Chéreau and Angela Winkler), editing *Le Vieux Cordelier* together, baby Herbert on Lucile's lap, even though the presses have been destroyed. It also contrasts with the charismatic Danton who lives in an aristocratic mansion with his fragile, sixteen-year-old bride.

Robespierre conforms himself to principle, while Camille and Lucile Desmoulines live by principle. Camille's gentility, however tender and pathetic, is genuine. A vulnerable idealist, Camille is, nonetheless, capable of understanding the pragmatic Philippeaux (Serge Merlin) who tells him at the Luxembourg prison that the "political process obeys its own mechanics that have nothing to do with justice." Danton rejects Philippeaux's "political process" as an impersonal intellectualization worthy of Robespierre. But the intellectualization does triumph in the end. Personal duplicity characterizes Robespierre and Danton. An austere anorexic, almost bloodless, and suffering from perpetual insomnia, Robespierre maintains his posture in the public eye. The somewhat incongruous civility of this revolutionary, immaculately dressed in the manner of the aristocrats of the Ancien Régime, astonishes even the members of his committee. Always the sober mind thinking, the leader in control, he is juxtaposed to the audacious and personally exuberant Danton, possessed by contradictions, uncontrolled fits of temper and calls for calm, reflective solitude and *joie de vivre*. The man of the people also finds himself alone in the crowd, astounded by what incomprehensible frenzy when, for instance, at the Conciergerie, a face of a man beckons him out of a crowd of well-wishers, pulls him towards prison bars, spits in his face and calls him a traitor.

Wajda is not documenting history but dramatizing a historical problem. *Danton* actually retreats from the *cinéma vérité* style which has been characteristic of the "new Wajda," particularly in *The Man of Marble* and *The Man of Iron*. To accentuate the seriousness of the political dialogue, Wajda resorts to theater. The film's dramatic style overlaid with symbolic vignettes and controlling metaphors is reminiscent of the earlier Wajda: the blade of the guillotine draped in a black tarpaulin shot in low angle; Danton's feast for Robespierre with its frank conversations about terror over a glass of red wine filled to the brim; Danton's failing voice during the course on the trial; young Duplay's mumbling recitations of the Declaration of the Rights of Man. This deliberate return to the stage in *Danton* contrasts with the antiaesthetics of the hand-held camera of Agnieszka, the young woman filmmaker in *Man of Marble* (a woman of marble herself!) who wants to recover the true, forbidden history of the hero of socialist labor who no longer exists.

It is significant that the degree of stylization in Wajda—and this I think can be said of Eastern European directors generally—is politically motivated and critically related to current history. Antiaesthetic documentarism reminiscent of the Soviet film-makers of the twenties reemerges in periods of political liberalization while dramatic foregrounding and allegorization characterize periods of repression. Wajda's quarrel, in contrast to Jerzy Skolimowski, has never been with realism. Skolimowski's *Moonlighting,* about Polish workers stranded in London during martial law while renovating a villa of a Polish bureaucrat, deflates realistic portrayal by its visual minimalism. Wajda is arguing with the ideals of socialist realism—represented in *Danton* by Jacques-Louis David—with art that magnifies revolutionary deeds and transforms history, and thereby human lies, into myth.

Danton at the guillotine

In the film, David, sketching Danton *en route* to the guillotine, is never really satisfied with his likeness.

The whole point of making a historical film is to engage history—to explore its interior and to recover its character—not to use history as a decor (Wajda's criticism of Abel Gance's treatment of the French Revolution in *Napoléon*) or dramatize ready-made myth (Robert Hossein's recent adaptation of *Les Misérables,* for example). Film, says Wajda, should reinstate what history disregards and challenge ideology by expressing the marginal view, in effect, by completing its logic. Wajda's attitude towards official reconstructions of history is perhaps best expressed in a vignette in *Landscape after the Battle,* where a chaotic crowd of refugees and concentration camp victims storms a stage set of the "Battle of Grunwald," a POW performance, based on the painting by Jan Matejko commemorating "the proudest moment" in Polish history, the victory over the Teutonic Knights in 1410. What makes *Danton* an emotional spectacle is the critical historical argument in which it willingly engages, an argument which it never entirely resolves but which, nonetheless, impresses upon us its determination to expose the sentiments and the personal complexes that distort historical sense—not simply then but also now.

Danton, then, is not without its "Polish ambiance." Politically, it is only natural for a film-maker from "post-Marxist" Poland to want to explore the unconsciousness of the "dictatorship of the proletariat"—to expose the personality that has been dedicated for so long to this slogan. It is also natural for him to reflect on the French Revolution, not only because it inspired the Bolshevik leadership during the October Revolution, but because, as Wajda observed in an interview in *Nouvelles Littéraires* (January 6, 1983), it invented the political process as we know it today. Hence, *Danton* implicates not only Robespierre and his committees of Public Salvation and National Security—of which General Jaruzelski's WRON and ZOMO are only a feeble echo—but also more directly the ideological deformations of Bolshevism, the *embourgeoisement* of the Left and the ideological policies of the party apparatus. As Wajda himself explained in his interview with *Le Monde* (January 6, 1983):

> I have always asked myself why the leaders of the Bolshevik Revolution have been interested in these two personalities [Danton and Robespierre]. In a certain sense, the film responds to this question. Before 1918, Lenin had been citing Danton especially: he wanted to overthrow the tsarist regime in much the same way as your [French] tribune had contributed to the fall of the monarchy. After 1918, Lenin only cited and extensively analyzed Robespierre. That is when he wanted to preserve the revolutionary state in Soviet Russia, to keep power and not allow a vacuum of authority to develop.

Wajda's *Danton* seems to equate intellectual purism with bureaucratic terror, justified in the name of the nation and history, which represents itself as the only legitimate means by which the revolutionary process—and indeed history—can continue. Its historical weapon, the guillotine, as insensible and as sure as the repressed mind that adminsters its fall, performs the rite of human sacrifice on which ideological abstinence feeds.

Reviews

THE DRAUGHTSMAN'S CONTRACT

Written and directed by Peter Greenaway. Photography: Curtis Clark. Editing: John Wilson. Music: Michael Nyman. Sound: Godfrey Kirby. Produced by the British Film Institute and BBC Channel 4. UA Classics.

Peter Greenaway has suggested in an interview (*Sight and Sound,* Autumn 1982) that *The Draughtsman's Contract* marks the transition in his career from "private" to "public" film-making. One can see easily enough the pattern his work has taken: early avant-garde shorts, preoccupied with structure and its absurdist mitigation—Tony Rayns has called Greenaway's work "a cinema of irony"—followed by lengthier, more complex films which increasingly incorporate mainstream elements like character and story. The gradual infusion of components of dramatic narrative into Greenaway's formalist/structuralist films reaches the point in *The Draughtsman's Contract* where the film can appeal to an audience that may not share Greenaway's intellectual preoccupations. As part of the reach for a wider audience. *The Draughtsman's Contract* also uses a consistent, articulated political strategy, something that was missing for the most part from Greenaway's earlier work. It is my intention in this article to trace the development of Greenaway's politics in some of his more recent films, and to analyze the culmination of that development in the political text of *The Draughtsman's Contract.*

The audience for Greenaway's work prior to *The Draughtsman's Contract* was primarily the British film-intellectual avant-garde. There was nothing in the social context in which these films existed, and for which they were intended, that would necessitate a manifestly political text. The audience for structuralist avant-garde films is fairly limited and homogeneous. With such an audience in mind, Greenaway could be free to explore in a purely formal way the absurdities of arbitrary systems of classification (*Windows* (1975), *Water Wrackets* (1975), *Dear Phone* (1977)) and the Borgesian Labyrinths of *A Walk Through H* (1978) and *Vertical Features Remake* (1978). These "private" films are noticeably exclusive; much of *The Falls* (1980) is incomprehensible unless one is familiar with Greenaway's earlier work. The film's many self-reflexive witticisms are lost on anyone outside an initiated group. Given also its exhausting length, *The Falls* would serve well as the basis for a study of that sociological phenomenon, the formalist film as strenuous *rite de passage* for movie-going intellectuals.

The creeping-in of non-formalist values is apparent in the Tulse Luper films—*A Walk Through H, Vertical Features Remake,* and more peripherally, *The Falls. A Walk Through H* is organized around a central plot and character, as the narrator unravels the story of his search for the undefined H. *Vertical Features Remake* is a fictional documentary; it relates the attempt by the "Institute of Reclamation and Restoration" to remake an imaginary film by an imaginary film-maker, the elusive Tulse Luper. Though these films and *The Falls* utilize traditional dramatic conventions—unifying narratives, sympathetic characters, and even relationships between those characters—Greenaway maintains a wary, ironic distance from these elements. As in the earlier work, the structures are effectively undermined by the overriding absurdism of the films. The story in *A Walk Through H,* for example, begins to sink under its own weight as various tangents and details obscure the slender narrative. By the end the only consistencies lie in repetitions—shots of birds, references to Tulse Luper, and the series of vritually indistinguishable paintings which are the main mechanism of the film's visual narrative. Similarly, in *Vertical Features Remake,* the goals of the Institute of Reclamation and Restoration—the "plot"—become more and more elusive as we watch remake after remake of the film-within-the-film, *Vertical Features.*

The relationship between Greenaway's films and his audience changes as the absurdist/formalist structures on the one hand converge with the more traditional/realist structures and elements on the other. In the films which remained within a safely abstract framework, where objects and filmic structures could interact without the burden of audience identification or sympathies, a reasonably risk-free, untroubled movie-going experience could be expected. However, the introduction of characters and more complex narratives (visual

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as well as spoken) complicates the relationship between viewer and film. The audience might now identify with, or make emotional investments in, features of the film (e.g., the narrator's plight, or the visual narrative of the "maps," in *A Walk Through H;* the film restoration project, or even the personal problems of Tulse Luper, in *Vertical Features Remake*). In this situation the absurdist undercutting of the traditional elements, the ironic distancing mentioned above, takes on a crueller aspect. As the possibility of profound audience involvement in certain filmic structures increases, the distance between audience and film is decreased; the distance between viewer and object, essential to Greenaway's formalism, becomes more difficult to maintain. The resolution of this tension, achieved by the imposition of a rigid absurdism (the story collapses; the characters become ridiculous; the structure disintegrates into repetitions), is an assertion of power by the film-maker. The audience is then forced into a position of estrangement from the text, in order to protect itself from the cold structural hold placed on the film.

When the film's content is to some degree political, as in *The Falls,* this pattern of conflict and resolution is particularly disturbing. The film is a series of 92 character portraits, all of people whose names contain the word "fall." They are supposed to be representative of the 19 million survivors of a Violent Unknown Event (VUE), which rather resembles a nuclear holocaust. The portraits incorporate interviews, but are primarily images with a documentary-style voice-over narration. The film is for the most part farcical in tone; it begins with a list of the quite silly names of the "survivors," and ends some three hours later, having largely abandoned its premise in favor of abstract meditations on water and flight. However, there are moments when the distance between audience and film, created by the ironic tone, is shortened—for example, the repeated shot of a dead bird on a quay, or the strangely moving scene of a naked woman on a couch reading her very dull life story. The tension between these moments and the rest of the film mirrors the tension between author and audience. Because many of the film's characters are quite sympathetic, and given the real possibility of a

Mrs. Thalmann making her bargain with Neville

global disaster like the VUE, the alienating effect of Greenaway's style is more disturbing than in the films that were confined to the safer realm of abstraction. Because we can sympathize and identify with them, the characters' experience of being impotent before the absurdist formalism of the film's structure becomes shared by the audience. In this way a film which is, in one version, a cool intellectual exercise, becomes rather an assertion of authorial power.

In *The Draughtsman's Contract* it is again power which determines the film's structure and impels its development. However, the increased presence of traditional narrative elements—most importantly, social relations—in the film makes the power mechanism of the earlier films inadequate. In order to keep the textual power in the author's hands (or in any case out of the audience's), it was necessary to adopt a structure that could control elements that had been infrequent or missing in the earlier work: social relations, a highly developed narrative based on them, and the heightened possibilities for audience identification. The public film needs a public structure for the assertion of power—that is, it needs politics. Politics is the mediating ground where Greenaway's long concern with structure encounters a fairly advanced cross-over into dramatic narrative.

In the long, funny title sequence a simple opposition is set up for defining and molding the sympathies of the audience: the film presupposes audience alienation from a particular version of the ruling class, the rural English aristocracy ca. 1695. The earliest scenes are brief tableaux wherein: (1) the gentry men are made to look ridiculous by their wives, and through makeup and costuming; (2) the

supposedly superior gentry are laid low by the razor wit of Neville, the draughtsman of the title and one of two main characters who is not an aristocrat; (3) the sexual attractiveness of Neville is put forward in contrast with the effeteness of the aristocratic men. These factors combine to create a situation which is essentially a fantasy of working-class access to power. Neville, the only main character in the film who engages in actual production (although of a non-primary product) has apparently, as we see him in the film's early scenes, risen to the highest levels of social prominence by virtue of his skill. The price Neville is able to get for his work—access to the sexual favors of the aristocrat Mrs. Herbert—is perhaps the greatest symbolic defeat that Neville could inflict in the psychosexual class struggle. He appears, at this stage, to have cuckolded the ruling class.

Moreover, Neville's victory is not limited to the sexual battleground, which is the usual territory of conflict in the "two worlds" structure of the European workingman/wealthy woman romance. In Duvivier's *Pepe le Moko* (1937), for example, it is Pepe's (Jean Gabin) sexuality that allows his character to escape, however, briefly, the constraints of his class (represented by, among other things, Pepe's lower-class girlfriend). When he tries to extend his victory into a more substantial relationship, the wall between his world (the underclass free zone of the Casbah) and Gaby's is made brutally clear. The Gabin character's "escape" from the laws of class relations is resolutely circumscribed. The glittering hope, and eventual impossibility, of a transcendence of class barriers, or even a lasting sexual/romantic victory of the working-class man over his less potent upper-class counterpart, reaches its rather campy metaphysical limit in Jean Delannoy's *Les Jeux Sont Faits* (1947). The same juxtaposition of class aspirations and social laws hit phenomenological bedrock—"Can't you see it just won't work?"—in Antonioni's *Cronaca di un Amore* (1950). But in *The Draughtsman's Contract* Greenaway allows Neville more than just the exercise of sexual power. Neville is also able to beat his social superiors at their own game—he is, early on at least, invincible in the verbal badinage that forms the background noise of the power struggles within the aristocracy. This verbal skill represents a significant departure from the conventions of the workingman/wealthy woman romance that prevailed in the thirties and forties, and is probably attributable in part to changes in the level of audience education; certainly, any attempt by Jean Gabin to trade in his blue coveralls for a dinner jacket would have seemed, in that historical setting, less a victory than a betrayal.

In short, Neville's position of power at the beginning of *The Draughtsman's Contract* appears to be complete. He is, in every situation, arrogant rather than deferential. There is a slight hint of impending danger—two men during the opening party sequence vaguely plotting against him—but it is not great enough to disturb the general impression of Neville's success. This impression continues through the early part of the film as Neville begins his drawings of the estate of Mrs. Herbert's husband. The bouncy score for this section, composed by Greenaway's frequent collaborator Michael Nyman and based on themes by Purcell, underlines the humor (and security) of Neville's position.

During this section of the film our sympathies are firmly located with Neville. One way this is done is by making the aristocratic men look ridiculous, even powerless. Neville orders them about without hesitation in the name of his drawings. The profoundly arrogant Mr. Talmann, in particular, is the butt of Neville's wit. The fact that Talmann is both the epitome of stupid, conceited (and sexually impotent) aristocracy and the most ridiculed character in the film is not incidental to the film's structure. We are distanced from the upper class right at the start because the aristocrats seem so trivial. And due to the class roots of Talmann's behavior, our non-identification with him has a political cast. Neville and Mr. Talmann are opposite poles; the political struggle is defined between them. Neville, as the receiver of the audience's sympathies, as the successful *arriviste,* as a political fantasy figure, is the vessel of our political identity. While we may not feel a warm identification with Neville, given the distanced type of character that is the product of Greenaway's formalist/absurdist esthetic, we are forced, unless we happen to be aristocrats, to feel a political identification. With a political (ideological) sub-structure that makes sharp class distinctions, this identification of Neville with the audience is crucial to understanding *The*

Draughtsman's Contract. He is the surrogate of the audience, acting out our role in the political drama of the film.

The key problem for Neville is essentially information. This is a more subtle method by which we are allied with Neville—we are never given appreciably more information than he is. He, and we, believe at the start of the film that he is in control. He has negotiated the intial contract with Mrs. Herbert to his own demanding terms. The other characters seem intimidated and often ridiculed by him. But as the drawings progress, Neville notices annoying, though apparently meaningless, bits of detail intruding into his otherwise strictly organized drawings. A ladder against a wall, a nightshirt on a shrub, an open window—Neville faithfully records these as it is his professional creed "never to distort or to dissemble." Midway through the film Neville is confronted by Mrs. Talmann with a cagily worded suggestion: that the objects in his drawings could be clues to a murder. Neville, in a display of striking denseness, ignores her insinuations. Neville's apparent intelligence in the early part of the film disappears at this juncture; there is little room for it in either the political, psycho-sexual, or intellectual structures of the film. The political text requires that he be manipulable, uninformed and deprived of access to meanings. The psycho-sexual pattern requires that he be utterly malleable when enticed by sex. Greenaway's role for Neville in the intellectual schema—the literal-minded draughtsman, incapable of imagination—requires that he not be able to understand what Mrs. Talmann has virtually spelled out for him. The awkward subsuming of Neville's personality under these structural constraints repeats a mechanism common throughout the film. In one curious scene, Neville seems to understand the game being played with his drawings. He is discussing a painting with Mrs. Herbert, one which, he suggests, may contain hidden meanings—perhaps the painting hints at a murder, or a daughter's infidelities. Neville appears to know already what is going on behind the objects inserted into his own drawings. Yet outside of this one scene he is innocent of their meanings, and unimpressed by Mrs. Talmann's suggestion that they have a pattern. This scene contains a conflict between the story and the points Greenaway wishes to make about representation; the story cannot comfortably accommodate Neville's sudden insightfulness.

After Mrs. Talmann convinces Neville to agree to a contract of her own—sex, on her terms, in exchange for her "protection" of him—the hook is firmly in place. Neville is now willing to put in his drawings whatever objects Mrs. Talmann might wish to scatter in front of him. He is no longer in control of information. He is drawing objects without knowing their meaning. He is reproducing information about the world, he is recording a "reality." But as it becomes clear (to us, and to a lesser degree to Neville) that he doesn't know quite what he is doing, we see that reality itself, e.g., Neville's world of neutral objects, is the product over which neither Neville nor we have any control. Neville is at the existential limit of alienation from the object(s) of production: the objects he believes he is control of, and which by drawing he is in a sense producing, are actually full of mysterious meanings, meanings that eventually decide his fate, and that are decipherable only by his aristocrat employers.

Neville leaves the country house after completing 12 drawings. Just before he departs, Mr. Herbert's body, to no one's particular surprise, is recovered from the moat surrounding Compton Anstey. In Neville's absence the various residents of the house attribute vague meanings of a scandalous nature to the curious objects in his drawings. Some time later, Neville returns to the house, saying that he wishes to make a final drawing and to renew his relationship, if only briefly, with Mrs. Herbert. After the mystifyingly warm sexual reunion, Mrs. Herbert, in league with her daughter, Mrs. Talmann, reveals their "true" reason for agreeing to such unusual contracts with him: they wanted an heir, and Mr. Talmann had been failing to fulfill his side of the bargain. Neville then goes on to work on his final drawing, which is from a vantage point quite near where Mr. Herbert's body was found. He is confronted there by a group of masked men—the assembled male aristocrats of the house—who reveal their knowledge of his sexual activities, suggest he is responsible for Mr. Herbert's murder, then beat him to death after: (1) burning out his eyes, as they are necessary for his work; (2) taking the shirt off his back, to further emphasize his eco-

nomic degradation—as one of the killers says, "for what is a man without property?" The men then remove their masks and watch the 13 drawings burn.

"Reality," the world of objects and agreed-upon meanings, gradually becomes incomprehensible for the literal-minded draughtsman. In the course of the film it is apparent that the line between those who control reality and those who don't is almost exclusively a political and economic one. Neville's arrogant confidence in his own position and the objectiveness of his drawings (of the world he sees) is shown to be quite self-deceptive. Despite his early self-assurance, the value of his labor is not something he can control or understand; it is the aristocrats who control its meaning and importance. The extension of this social situation, as it is developed in *The Draughtsman's Contract,* is that the worker/producer in fact has no control over or understanding of "reality" at all, that that control is in the hands of the ruling class which employs him.

The political import of this situation is compounded by Neville's status as an *arriviste.* His political insurgency, which is a key focus of audience identification in the film, looks more and more foolhardy as the movie progresses, and eventually costs him his life. One way he might have escaped this fate is represented by Mr. Noyes, the estate manager/counsel of Mr. Herbert. Noyes is a scheming bourgeois; his political activity could be characterized as self-effacing burrowing-in, in contrast to Neville's arrogant stance. Noyes is eager to point out, from the beginning, that he is already a small property owner, and that his driving ambition is to own more. Interestingly, Neville's only concession to property is that, having drawn an estate, he might sometimes "hold the delight or despondency" of being a property owner. In any case, Noyes' strategy is the more successful, both in the film and in English history. His position in the political structure of the film reflects his in-between class status. He is, on the other hand, afraid of being blamed for Mr. Herbert's murder, and experiences, briefly, the feeling of being left out in the cold by his aristocrat friends. Yet at the end this fear is eased, as Noyes joins with his betters against the common class enemy, and helps to murder Neville.

There is little political ambiguity in the closing of class ranks in the climactic scene, nor in the ritual of the killing. Neville's unconventional contracts with Mrs. Herbert and Mrs. Talmann—the most spectacular aspects of his political ascendancy—turn out to be the keys to Neville's manipulation by his social betters. It is here that the possibility of the two women being vehicles for audience identification fades completely away. They are both, in some sense, "sympathetic" characters. In particular, Mrs. Herbert is quite pitilessly abused by Neville; her suffering is real. However, the two women are definitely on the other side of the political divide between Neville and the audience, on the one hand, and the ruling class on the other. They have more information—about the murder, about the contracts—than anyone. It is primarily their purposes, whatever they may be, which Neville is serving. Moreover, the scenes in which Mrs. Herbert's suffering is greatest—the sex scenes with Neville— are very elusive in their meaning. What are her real motives in this contract? The reasons given, especially the final one, are not at all convincing. After all, Neville certainly would have been able to help Mrs. Talmann with her inheritance problem independent of any preliminaries with Mrs. Herbert. Mrs. Herbert is concealing the truth about her behavior from the audience as she is from Neville, and so our sympathies for her would be somewhat misplaced. The superior position of the two women in the political structure of the film forces us away from them. In the end it is clear that Neville's political power and social position are illusions, created so that he might serve the purposes of the ruling class, and which he pays the greatest penalty for having enjoyed.

Because the audience is given very little information other than that available to Neville—we have no more "control over reality" than he does—his position as a surrogate for the audience is consistent throughout the film. And, as the control of information is the key political dynamic in the film, we quite appropriately share in his ignorance. Ultimately, we find ourselves in the same position of inferiority and political impotence as Neville. An interesting device which furthers this positioning is the human statue, the *genius loci* of Compton Anstey, who infrequently sneaks his way into the film. This odd character is a kind of secret vouchsafed to the audience. Save for one very brief and unclear scene,

the people who share this secret with us are: (1) Neville; (2) a servant; (3) a young boy, the nephew of Mr. Talmann. The statue character essentially acts as a device for making fun of the aristocrats. They don't know he's there, as he crawls along the roof above their dinner party, or climbs onto a stand, adopts a classical pose, then urinates. The scene with the young boy is indicative of the comic perspective the character provides. The boy is walking with Mr. Talmann, who is delivering a pompous lecture on the virtues of having German blood when one is an English nobleman. The boy notices the "statue" standing immobile against a wall. The statue turns and winks at the boy, then makes some hand gestures toward Mr. Talmann, whose back is turned, to the effect that Talmann is a buffoon. The consistent feature of all those who know of the character's existence is their powerlessness. In a film where access to meanings is the main political currency, the knowledge that the statue exists is "meaningless." The comic effect of our awareness of the statue—our little joke on the aristocrats—becomes rather a cruel joke on us at the end of the film. This is because the man/statue is, with us, a witness to the murder of Neville, and after the body is in the moat and the killers have left, the man/statue can do nothing to help. He is powerless because he is outside the narrative "reality" as it is defined by the film's ruling class. He can play a role in the larger sphere of the film—e.g., his status as a fantasy figure for the audience, in that he gives us the illusion that we have significant knowledge which the aristocrats lack—but in the social/political reality that *The Draughtsman's Contract* puts forward, the statue, like Neville and us, is impotent, even irrelevant.

The idea that the audience itself is placed in the position of a politically inferior class by the film is borne out by the ways in which the film fits/doesn't fit the narrative structure of a mystery. *The Draughtsman's Contract* is to some degree "accessible" as a whodunit surrounding the murder of Mr. Herbert. The country estate setting, the veiled dissatisfactions and desperations of the victim's assembled "friends"—Greenaway's film adopts many of the classic features of the British murder mystery genre.[1] The film's political text, however, cannot be fully contained within the generic structure, just as it stretches the boundaries of another narrative tradition, the workingman/wealthy woman romance. The pattern of political relationships that includes Neville, the film's ruling class, Greenaway and the audience cannot be comfortably enclosed within the confines of the murder mystery genre. Indeed, the dramatic tension of the whodunit is secondary to the true "mystery" of the film, that is, the question of Neville's true relationship with his social superiors. But in this second mystery the textual power is not divided in the same manner as it would be in a whodunit. In a murder mystery the key information is held by the murderer. The movie's protagonist(s) and the audience work on a roughly equal footing to get that information, and when, at the end, the truth is found out, it is shared. But in the political mystery of Neville's social position, the key information is held collectively by the class that defines his status. Moreover, this information is not discovered or deduced by Neville and the audience, but rather is given to us by the aristocratic class to which we are opposed by the film's structure. And the solution to the second mystery is, of course, that Neville, our political surrogate, is completely powerless.

There *is* a murder mystery in *The Draughtsman's Contract,* and the way in which it is solved, or rather not solved, is central to understanding the ideology promulgated by the film. The ending departs from the generic rules in that neither the protagonist nor the audience really reach a solution to the mystery. That crucial information, repeating a pattern seen throughout the film, is accessible only to the aristocrat class. The mystery genre, with its conclusive ending, affirms the power of the audience and, generally, the protagonist. *The Draughtsman's Contract,* by preventing both protagonist and audience from, in the broadest sense, "understanding," affirms the power of the film-maker and, within the text, the power of the socially dominant class, which controls the "true meanings" behind the presented reality of the film. This final mystification is aimed directly at the audience, without the interposition of its surrogate. The power relationship between the audience and the film, rather than the film's internal drama (Neville vs. the ruling class), necessitates the violation of the generic rules. The fact that the audience is not allowed to know who killed Mr. Herbert is of no importance to Neville.

But such a conventional "solving of the mystery" would be inconsistent with the film's political pattern, as it would involve the empowerment of the audience. The departure from the genre is an act of mystification which locates the audience in a position of impotence before the film's ruling class—and ultimately before Greenaway, as he too has positioned himself on the other side of the divide created by the control of meanings. The many hints and clues given to the audience are found in the end to be nothing more than scattered fragments of an unseen pattern. As such they are reminders of our powerlessness rather than keys to understanding. The fact that the aristocrats are not in complete agreement themselves about the truth behind the mystery does not alter their power. The dominant class's control (of information, of "reality") is affirmed; the self-deception and pointlessness of Neville's, and our, political insurgency and dreams of power is made brutally clear.

It may seem too much to suggest that the political text of *The Draughtsman's Contract* is also the argument of a political ideology. In the historical context of rural England in 1695, it might be considered a parable of social reality—the comeuppance of an insufferable parvenu. However, Greenaway's film locates the audience, not just Neville, in a position of subservience and inferiority, beneath a dominant social and political class; and, as we live in the present and not the past, the parable as it applies to us is very disturbing, at least from a left political perspective. Moreover, the political development traceable in Greenaway's films just prior to *The Draughtsman's Contract* suggests that his concern is with contemporary ideas and audiences, and not with the making of stylish period dramas. The reality presented in *The Draughtsman's Contract* shows opposition to the political hegemony of the ruling class as a pathetic self-deception. Political power in the film is defined as the control of (or the power to determine) the meanings contained in objects. The triumph of the political status quo is therefore shown not simply as a social phenomenon but rather as part of the natural state of things. Although *The Draughtsman's Contract* is "avant-garde," it partakes of the oldest of cinematic traditions: the validation, as phenomenological reality, of a political structure that supports the dominant class.

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1. Though *The Draughtsman's Contract* may not be satisfying as a mystery, it is certainly saleable as one. Most major American reviewers have characterized it as a stylish, witty romp of a mystery; for a "noncommercial" movie, it has done well at the box office.

A QUESTION OF SILENCE

Script and direction: Marleen Gorris. Photography: Frans Bromet. Music: Lodewijk de Boer. Quartet Films.

Films with a political message rarely escape from a dilemma: if they deliver the message bluntly, they preach only to the converted; if they wrap it in formal skill, the unconverted can easily disregard it. *A Question of Silence* breaks out of this dilemma, since its strong feminist message reinforces and is reinforced by its formal power. The 1982 Dutch film tells a simple story involving four women. Three of them—a housewife, a waitress, and an executive secretary, who had never met before—are arrested for having murdered the owner of a boutique whom they did not know. The fourth woman, a psychiatrist, is assigned by the court to determine their state of mind. At first, like everyone else, she assumes that they must have been at least temporarily insane, but gradually she sees how they were frustrated by the attitudes of the men they encountered in their daily lives (as she becomes increasingly aware of such attitudes in her own life). Taking the view that this cumulative frustration triggered their act of violence, she testifies—to the consternation of the court—that they were sane.

The film has aroused considerable criticism. Janet Maslin of *The New York Times* wrote that "the feminist cause will not be well served by" it, and Jack Kroll of *Newsweek,* while implicitly admiring Gorris's talent, described *A Question of Silence* as "the most ferociously anti-male feminist movie I've ever seen." Undoubtedly the most scandalous part of the film for many viewers is the actual killing. To begin with, it is presented as gratuitous and unjustified. The boutique owner sees Christine, the housewife (Edda Barends), shoplifting a skirt and goes to take it from her. Apart from a somewhat supercilious smile on his face, nothing he says or does could be termed a provocation. Christine grabs the skirt back

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and takes another article of clothing. An, the waitress (Nelly Frijda), and Andrea, the secretary (Henriette Tol), who also happen to be in the boutique, have been watching, and now they too ostentatiously shoplift and confront the owner. After a long tableau, Christine strikes the first blow.

Here the scene becomes scandalous in another way—or rather, in two other ways. The attack is made not in the heat of anger but with deliberation, and it is carried out with gruesome thoroughness. Gorris does not show any blood—the victim quickly falls out of the field of view—but we can see the women's movements and their improvised weapons (jagged broken coathangers, a hatstand) and we can hear the impact. To highlight the horror, Gorris also lets us hear an occasional gurgle from Christine's infant son, whose stroller the owner solicitously parked behind the counter a few minutes earlier. In another scene, moreover, the pathologist gives Janine, the psychiatrist (Cox Habbema), a graphic verbal description of the resulting mutilation, which includes the destruction of the victim's genitals.

Yet all of these scandalous elements are in fact essential to the film's thesis. Suppose, for example, that the boutique owner had attacked Christine, the other women had rushed to her defense, and they had killed him in the heat of the struggle. The question of feminism would then dissolve into the legal issues of a specific case: the film would be primarily about the merits of justifiable homicide. For similar reasons, Gorris does not try to justify the women's act by showing lengthy or vicious examples of sexism that they have suffered. (In fact, much of the sexism in the film takes the form of subtle attitudes and occurs diegetically after the murder, influencing not the defendants' actions but Janine's—and the viewer's—awareness.) By making the murder unjustified, deliberate and nasty, Gorris sweeps away the irrelevancies and leaves the feminist issue clear: the women have reached a point of frustration at which one simple act by a man turns him into their scapegoat.

Consequently, Janine's purpose at the trial is not at all to have the three defendants acquitted. Generating sympathy for them would again obscure the issue. A declaration that they were insane—which the (male) prosecutor is prepared to accept—would drain their act of its significance. That is why Janine insists on their full responsibility.

A Question of Silence

This rigorous grasp of the central issue distinguishes *A Question of Silence* from nearly all other political films, but the most fruitful comparison is with a film that has been acclaimed as a feminist breakthrough: *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles.* (An early appraisal of it appeared in the Summer 1977 issue of this journal.) This is indeed an original film made by women; it focuses in unprecedented detail on "women's work"—cooking, washing dishes, making beds, etc.—and it includes the gratuitous killing of a man. Yet Jeanne Dielman obstinately remains an individual, a special case. She is a slave to housework because she is a compulsive, and she earns money by turning a daily trick because this provides the greatest yield for the smallest disruption of her routine. Of course, we can speculate that her late husband or male-dominated society aggravated her compulsive behavior, but then we can also speculate that the everyday life of a noncompulsive widow would unfold quite differently. As for the killing, it is gratuitous in a different sense from that in *A Question of Silence.* There it marks the beginning of the film's significance, but in *Jeanne Dielman* it confronts the viewer as a dead end—a flourish that has to be clumsily prepared (anyone familiar with movie melodramas knows why the scissors "happen" to be left in the bedroom). *Jeanne Dielman* does present an extraordinary study of a woman, but it does not (to this male, at least) say much about women.

Although *A Question of Silence* lacks *Jeanne Dielman*'s sensuous texture of image and sound, that is because Gorris knows not only what to say but also how best to say it. Metic-

ulous realism would obscure the symbolic role of the three women, just as complete stylization would impede its application to real life. Thus Gorris skillfully interweaves the two approaches. In detail, virtually everything that is seen and heard in the film follows the conventions of narrative realism; at the same time, the orchestration of the scenes and narrative events is stylized. Only in one sequence, however, does the stylization have much in common with the obvious alienation devices of such political film-makers as Godard, Straub-Huillet and Jancsó. Gorris's methods are economical and effective. To begin with, she makes good use of artifices that now form an accepted part of narrative realism: systematic crosscutting, continual flashbacks to the killing, interplay between Janine's live interviews with the defendants and her recordings of them, and the inversion of the opening (where Janine makes sexual overtures to her attorney husband Ruud) in the ending (where she turns away from him to join a group of women).

Except at the killing and the trial, the three women are never seen together, yet Gorris organizes their scenes to suggest their unity. Each of them is seen acting or reacting in turn to the same situations: being arrested; being asked whether there were any witnesses in the boutique; their activities after the killing (Christine goes with her infant son to a funfair, An prepares herself a gourmet dinner, Andrea plays along with a man who mistakes her for a prostitute); and their sudden impatience with Janine's questioning. The stylized unity of the three women extends to a noticeable gap in these scenes: there is no mention of the killing itself or of what was in their minds at the time. Christine avoids these topics by keeping silent (she utters only one sentence in the whole film); An avoids them by rattling on about a variety of other topics; Andrea mixes both strategies. While the silence of the title refers ostensibly to Christine (the original Dutch title is *De Stilte Rond Christine M,* or *The Silence Around Christine M*), its meaning undoubtedly extends to the refusal of all three to discuss the killing—for this too would reduce the issue to a case study with its own particular circumstances (motives, explanations, justifications).

The most obvious stylization occurs during the trial. After Janine has insisted, against the skeptical outrage of the prosecutor and judge, that the three women are and were sane, and has pointed to the crucial fact that the boutique owner was a man, the prosecutor asks rhetorically what difference it would have made if the owner had been a woman or if the three killers had been men. At this the three defendants, who have shown no more interest in the proceedings than their guards, start to laugh. As they continue laughing, three women spectators who were in the boutique at the time of the killing also start to laugh; and then Janine joins in. After the judge has tried in vain to silence the women, he orders the court cleared: the defendants are still laughing as they are escorted toward their cells, and the witnesses and Janine are still laughing as they leave for the street.

Even this Brechtian artifice does not depart very far from narrative realism—less far, in fact, than characters bursting into choral song in a musical—yet it strikes exactly the right note. It provides the film with a strong ending at no cost to anything that has gone before. Consider some alternatives. A change of heart in the court officials, or any other mitigation of the conflict between the court and the women, would bring premature relief: to sustain its thesis, the film must leave the tensions unresolved. (In the final image, Gorris reaffirms the conflict by showing Janine turn away from Ruud to join the women witnesses.) On the other hand, a straightforward ending, with the defendants found either guilty or insane, would not only risk flatness but would focus too much attention on the merits of the individual case. Moreover, while Janine and the witnesses might protest the judgment, the defendants (without breaking completely out of character) would not, so that the women would remain disunited. By interrupting the proceedings with the women's laughter, Gorris is able both to show their solidarity and to draw the viewer's attention away from the case to the feminist issue.

In so doing, Gorris also checks our emotional involvement in the plight of the defendants. It would be easy to let us indulge in pity for them and indignation with the "system" that they confront. But prejudice can survive in all kinds of systems (most insidiously, in those that claim to have eradicated it): it exists

in us, not in the Other. Easy emotions would cloud our awareness of that prejudice and its workings. Thus Gorris provides an ending that is emotionally ungratifying but formally satisfying.

Despite its avoidance of easy emotions, this is not a cold film. To begin with: as a male viewer, I do not feel threatened or rejected. I do not feel threatened by the killing because the women make no attempt to justify it or evade responsibility for it. There is no implied demand for a "class struggle" in which all members of the offending sex are to be considered fair game. In fact, for all its single-minded feminism, *A Question of Silence* has a complex attitude toward men that is reflected in the circumstances of its making: though no male feminists appear in the film's diegetic world, many men helped Gorris to create it. On the production side, we may take a negative view of this male help and deplore the lack of opportunities for Dutch women producers, photographers, composers, etc.; but the large number of minor but crucial male roles in front of the camera restores the balance.

As a counterpart to this ambiguity within the film, Gorris leaves open the question of personal relations between men and women. At the end, Janine's husband Ruud is waiting for her outside the courthouse, despite his earlier anger (he feared that her stand would reflect on his legal career). It might be argued that Ruud at this point serves only as a plot device, like the scissors in Jeanne Dielman's bedroom: he is there so that Janine can make her choice between him and the women witnesses. Unlike the scissors, however—which could have been replaced by a fork or a knitting needle with little change of meaning—the presence of Ruud is bound up with the film's main thesis. Having organized the film with such skill up to this point, Gorris could easily have found an alternative device (Ruud might have left a note that Janine declined to read) if she had wanted to suggest an irrevocable break.

The film's most multivalent encounter between the sexes is Andrea's masquerade as a prostitute. Its obvious sense, in the feminist context, is that of a role reversal: traditionally in films and fiction it is men who use sex as a release from a charged experience, and here it is a woman. Moreover, Andrea takes charge of the encounter: she neither removes her outer clothing nor allows the man to embrace her. Still, the fact that she calmly allows herself to be taken for a prostitute—archetype of the subjugated female—strikes a dissonant note, especially as she has just helped to murder a man with far less provocation. Also, it does seem that both Andrea and her "john" seem to obtain satisfaction from their act. Here again, in a film that affirms the simplicity of the broad feminist issue, Gorris acknowledges the complexity and inconsistency of relations between individuals.

Even though *A Question of Silence* confidently avoids all the internal flaws of most political films, delivering a powerful message without denying the complexity of life, can it overcome the major external difficulty—that is, can it reach more than the converted? In English-speaking countries, at least, the Dutch dialogue and English subtitles are enough to bar the film from any wide release. But it can still find un- or only semi-converted viewers. The same mini-festival that introduced *A Question of Silence* to New York City (the New Directors/New Films series organized by the Film Society of Lincoln Center and the Museum of Modern Art) also included Romain Goupil's *Half a Life,* a memoir of radical left activism in France in the sixties and early seventies. While Goupil comments ironically on various errors of that radical experience, he seems unaware of its sexist bias: all the women who appear in the film are either handmaids or girlfriends. The audiences of art theaters in big cities and university towns no doubt include other men who could benefit from Gorris's striking message.

—WILLIAM JOHNSON

UNION CITY

Written and directed by Mark Reichert. Photography: Edward Lachman. Producer: Graham Belin. Music: Chris Stein. Kinesis, Ltd.

Union City is at once foreign and familiar. Written and directed by Mark Reichert, this independently financed little color film is an offbeat drama which moves a thirties Cornell Woolrich crime story up to a fifties setting and endows it with a lively, allusive visual richness which has an ironic eighties undercurrent to it. Reichert's film dabbles in the stuff of *film noir* and its plot and O. Henry-style ending

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(drawn from Woolrich's "The Corpse Next Door") evoke old-fashioned popular crime fiction. Attention to period detail helps the film exercise a certain fascination as an ironic remembrance of times past, but the overall effect has less to do with its elements of nostalgia and suspense than with the subtly caustic manipulation of its sensuous *mise en scène.* While much of the story is in keeping with the *film noir* tradition of seedy, night-in-the-city fatalism, Reichert and company treat it like a mixture of Pop Art and Edgar Allan Poe. Coupled with its fresh and sophisticated visual sense, the film's alterations of the original story make it an adaptation whose period-piece nostalgia is at once sensual and ironic. And if Reichert is dabbling in the margins of *film noir,* he has used the genre as part of his shrewdly visualized entry into the eros and terror of people caught in a precarious but static thrall.

Dennis Lipscomb is especially good as the central character, a semi-milquetoast bookkeeper named Harlan who works for a lawnmower manufacturer and is having trouble satisfying his bored-and-sexy wife, Lillian (Deborah Harry, mostly minus her Blondie image). As he evokes the raw anxiety beneath the petty bourgeois stylishness of the Eisenhower era, Lipscomb sometimes resembles a fear-drenched Jack Nicholson; the unsatisfied housewife, meanwhile, aspires to the Marilyn Monroe brand of beauty, but does not become a blonde until a very late and ironic point in the movie. The bookkeeper's anxieties lead to a homicidal overreaction to an irritating domestic event: someone is sneaking an occasional drink from the couple's bottled milk just after it is delivered to the apartment door in the small hours of the morning. That overreaction and its subsequent repercussions are the bases for a crime story with a surprise ending, but *Union City* is more concerned with its characters' trapped lives than with murder. And Reichert's routine treatment of the suspense elements backhandedly permits greater attention to the deceptively attractive surroundings of the characters' quietly suffocating lives. Thus, the film's spasms of drama and violence become expressions of impulses doomed to futility; the atmosphere of complacency and the desire for comfort border on the grotesque, but ultimately drown in their own interior decoration.

Reichert has taken a number of liberties with the original, but always to good effect, especially with the psychosexual dimension that Reichert and company have brought to the story through emphasis on ambience and through the additions among the characters. Everett McGill is casually self-assured as the apartment house superintendent, whose affair with the bookkeeper's wife was not part of Woolrich's original. Irina Maleeva is appropriately peculiar as a neighbor who presents herself to the world as a contessa, albeit a rather seedy one, and who is also not a part of the original (Reichert has given her and the man the bookkeeper thinks he has killed bits of voyeuristic knowledge about the unhappy couple's troubled sex life). Pat Benatar and Tony Azito play the saucy, sexually revved-up couple who move into the vacant apartment in which the "corpse" was hidden. Benatar's brief performance is one of several aspects of the film version which have a touch of campy put-on, and Azito's inspired quirkiness economically adds a dimension of perverse comedy not to be found in the original. There is also the addition of a friendly black family which comes to look at the vacant flat (a situation which combines with the bookkeeper's guilt and paranoia to bring a hint of racism to the increasingly turbulent drift of the main character's life). But in spite of these additions and changes, *Union City* remains surprisingly faithful to Woolrich. Reichert's adaptation is both freewheeling and apt, and he may have caught the underlying notes of seedy self-hatred and claustrophobic tackiness better than any previous adaptor of Woolrich's fiction. Indeed, the sexual material brings to the foreground the sexual anguish that seems to have marked Woolrich's life and work.

But *Union City* is memorable not as a literary adaptation, but rather as another striking example of vital, inventive film-making outside the Hollywood mainline. Reichert uses color and space in ways which channel the film's pop nostalgia toward a sharp sense of paranoia and blocked sexuality. The images' "hot" colors (particularly the insistently sexual red of a lampshade in the couple's apartment, but also the electric blue of their kitchen walls) intensify the claustrophobia

created by the cramped spaces of the apartment and the bookkeeper's office (a tiny cubicle in which the placement of his desk leaves him literally backed into a corner). The sense of confinement carries over into scenes involving the superintendent's Chevrolet as well; the super and the bookkeeper's wife have a couple of conversations in it and presumably use it for their weekly journeys to the matinee, but in the film itself, the car never moves: like much of the rest of *Union City*'s decor, it is "beautiful," falsely luxuriant, and static. And the claustrophobia of spaces seems inseparable from the characters' emotional blockages. The bookkeeper, unable to have sex with his more-than-willing wife, retreats to the neighborhood tavern and the company of a commiserating bartender who makes a point of being Harlan's "*best* friend;" and the wife, whose past is vaguely sordid, resorts to masturbation and erotic poses in front of the bedroom mirror, as well as to dallying with the building superintendent over coffee and those trips to the matinee. Sometimes the characters' use of the eroticized language of blues lyrics ("my little red rooster won't crow for you," "little sugar in your bowl," etc.) intensifies the sense of impasse. Even the bookkeeper's paranoia has its ill-concealed sexual dimension: "No son of a bitch is gonna wrap his ugly lips around my bottle of milk." Here and elsewhere in the film, a nicely managed disproportion between emotional force and the "objective" situation conveys the sexual element without being too forceful. Likewise, the wife's taunting references to her husband's Navy background ("Didn't they teach you anything in the Navy?") and her pointedly ironic bedroom line ("What'ya gonna do about it, sailor?") serve to evoke sexual desire which can finally express itself only as a static pose.

Fifties icons and images (Marilyn Monroe, that vintage Chevrolet, the milk bottles, the lampshade, a pack of unfiltered cigarettes, etc.) figure prominently in the film, while visual compositions involving spilled milk and a pool of blood have a tidy and almost abstract orderliness which recalls the graphics and illustrations of pre-fifties popular magazines. And the final shot of the film makes use of a huge billboard which simultaneously evokes realism and studio artifice. Reichert and company

UNION CITY

use their rich, sophisticated idiom to give this narrative in the "tell-tale heart" mode a subtly dream-like irrealism—almost as if the story were taking place inside a magazine illustration from the thirties or forties. But the "as if" is a crucial aspect: these sophisticated visual tactics, a mixture of allusiveness and period fetishism, permit *Union City* to stand both inside and outside of its *film noir* seductiveness. The sensuous self-consciousness of its visual style functions both as its primary appeal (the iconic fascination of Pop Art) and as a subtle distancing device (objects and colors stand out in a way that helps force the drama of emotion into a larger context).

The bookkeeper's paranoia and sexual panic culminate in a scene which resolves the murder story in an unexpected way and which literally and ironically releases the film from its own claustrophobic settings. In this climactic scene, the bookkeeper—thinking that he is about to be exposed as a murderer—leaps to his death through an upper-story window. The leap is doubly ironic because the man he "killed" is still alive and the shocked gasp which precipitates his last act is itself elicited not, as Harlan thinks, by discovery of a corpse, but by the sight of a bloodstain. That this

bloodstain is on what is to be a marital bed is perhaps the source of a separate but similar shock to the young, freshly arrived neighbor who finds it. But throughout this scene, in which Harlan is helping the younger man with a balky Murphy bed in which the "corpse" is ostensibly hidden, Reichert points up the bookkeeper's distraught helpfulness and his awareness of the open window across the room. The window itself offers us an open-air, daytime view of the city outside. Thus, since most of the film has taken place at night or indoors, the window is an ironic escape hatch for the bookkeeper. But in the visual scheme of the film, that window also represents an exhilarating release from the oppressive artificiality of the world of most of the film. In making a mistaken suicide leap coincide with a stunning movement of "liberation," Reichert gives us more than the obvious plot twist: the act of self-destruction becomes a measure of the price of freedom exacted by the sexual/nostalgic thrall in which much of the film immerses both the audience and the characters. By giving its main character an opening to leap through, *Union City* turns its eroticized nostalgia inside out; by making us see how that window might mean both freedom and death, it lets us jump through too—but to recognition.

These stylistic convolutions suggest that Reichert has profitably absorbed the influence of Fassbinder—particularly that aspect of the late German's method which derived in turn from an interest in Douglas Sirk's handling of melodrama. Like Mark Rappaport, Reichert gives melodramatic material a strikingly contemporary kind of irony which draws on the emotional resources of the older popular form while also placing those emotions in the perspective of a more distanced modernism. As with Rappaport, the result is a paradoxical kind of anti-cinema—chock full of story even though a non-narrative sensibility predominates. But whereas Rappaport gravitates toward the mysteries of fragmented relationships in *Local Color* and *The Scenic Route,* Reichert works toward a more social sense of that fragmentation. Rappaport's allusions to *Jules and Jim* in *Local Color* make for an ironic counterpoint whose main consequence is aesthetic. But Reichert's allusions point back to the structure of the trap in which his characters are caught: the bookkeeper's wife glowingly tells her lover, "I bought the red shoes," thus performing a symbolic act of adultery while also setting up mythic reverberations with the Powell-Pressburger ballet film, which she may have seen at the matinee; and when she emerges as a newly blonde Marilyn Monroe *semblable,* the flush of her pleasure is frozen by the news that her husband is dead. *Union City*'s deft handling of such allusions is one of the indications that Reichert is a film-maker of visual ingenuity who also has something to say.

—PETER HOGUE

GANDHI

Produced and directed by Richard Attenborough. Written by John Briley. Photography: Billy Williams and Ronnie Taylor. Editing: John Bloom. Music: Ravi Shankar. Co-producers: Rani Dube and George Fenton. Columbia.

"Saints should always be judged guilty until they are proved innocent," wrote George Orwell in his remarkable essay on Gandhi. In Richard Attenborough's treatment of Gandhi, sainthood is exonerated from all value judgments. In India one always speaks of Gandhi with either the adjective Mahatma, meaning "great soul" or one adds the suffix "ji," a respectful form of address like "sir." Attenborough's three-hour film on Gandhi concentrates primarily on the Mahatmaness of the man, obliterating most human nuances that made Gandhi the unique person that he was.

Gandhi was not a prophet. He did not come to India from South Africa like Christ, assemble disciples around him like the twelve apostles and, determined to make the sun set on the British Empire, announce: "Drop your nets and follow me!" Unfortunately this is how Attenborough depicts him. Nehru, the late Indian Prime Minister, had warned Attenborough of this when the idea of the film had been first proposed to him. "Whatever you do, do not deify him. That's what we have done in India. Gandhi was too great a man to be deified."

Gandhi's fundamental pacifism was both a philosophy and a policy of nonviolence that enabled him to defeat, not only the British, but the colonial temperament which they personified. He achieved an astounding moral

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triumph over a successful policy of imperialism and offered, for the newly awakened collective conscience, a brave new world. The origins and motivations of Gandhi's nonviolent strategy arose from his dialectic of *Satyagraha,* which literally meant "a firm grasp of the truth." Joan V. Bondurant in her book *Conquest of Violence: The Gandhian Philosophy of Conflict* explains the dialectic very well. She states: ". . . He fashioned a method of conflict in the exercise of which a man could come to know what he is and what it means to evolve. In Satyagraha, dogma gives way to an open exploration of context. The objective is not to assert propositions, but to create possibilities. In opening up new choices and in confronting an opponent with the demand that he make a choice, the Satyagrahi involves himself in acts of 'ethical existence.' "[1]

What Attenborough misses is this crucial point that Gandhi's Satyagraha was not just a method invented to throw out a colonial oppressor but an "ethical existence" which he wanted all of mankind to embrace. In the film all that we see is Gandhi practicing *ahimsa* or nonviolence as a political stance. No doubt this political stance was a historical and nationalistic necessity, but it was a philosophy born out of an ethical core which Gandhi had attained after years of striving, sacrifice and self-discipline. Attenborough's Gandhi seems to possess it from the moment he strides into the film frame. This gives us hardly any glimpse of a dialectic that evolved as Gandhi himself evolved against the panorama of the nationalistic struggle. When this fails to materialize all that one is left with is a naive chess game in which a man with a stick and loincloth is pitted against a monarch with a scepter and golden crown.

History was never achieved singlehandedly by one man. Gandhi's magnificent struggle against the British was fought with a team of revolutionaries, dedicated men and women, who were illustrious in their own right. Gandhi's unique contribution lay in uniting them, in settling their personal differences and in consolidating them as one spirit bent on achieving freedom. In the span of three hours it would not be possible for the film-makers to delineate all this, but they could have suggested it. Within the epic framework of the film they should have concentrated, at least, on two of Gandhi's great contemporaries, Nehru and Patel.

All that Attenborough shows Gandhi achieving with his silent team of revolutionaries is a dramatic kind of humbug. Gandhi smiles, pats them on their backs, leans heavily on their shoulders while walking with them, and in the twinkling of an eye, every time these motions are repeated, one more nail is shown as being hammered into the British Empire's coffin. What brought Nehru and Patel under the Mahatma's spell, for instance, would have been a unique subplot in itself. It could have explained to the audience even more concretely that crucial side of Gandhi which has been totally ignored, that ". . . inside the saint, or near-saint, there was a very shrewd, able person who could, if he had chosen, have been a brilliant success as a lawyer, an administrator or perhaps even a business man." (George Orwell)

For example, the famous Salt March which Gandhi undertook, when he marched for 24 days from his ashram at Porbander to Dandi, miles away on the sea-shore, could have been analytically depicted by Attenborough to bring out the superb mixture that Gandhi was of the saint/politician. When Gandhi summoned his countrymen to make salt in defiance of the strict Salt Laws imposed by the British Government, it was much more complex than the spiritual/metaphorical gesture which the film shows him attaining, almost like Christ turning water into wine. What Gandhi was trying to show was that the only way to defy an absurd law was to retaliate in an equally absurd but shrewd manner. The salt of the sea is given to all men by nature. By asking every Indian to repeat his gesture of picking up the sea-salt and carrying it home, Gandhi was scoring a fundamental ethical victory over a squint-eyed prejudicial law.

What the politician began the saint completed. A frail 61-year-old man striding prophetically towards the seashore with a detertermined band of 75 disciples created an unprecedented response. How many Indians must have likened him to Rama, the great Hindu God, voluntarily marching to his forest exile to honor his father's vow, given at a rash moment to his jealous stepmother who wanted *her* son crowned king instead of Rama? How

many all over the world must have felt Gandhi to be Moses leading the Israelites to freedom from the Egyptians? By the time he reached Dandi, the political march had assumed all the trappings of a holy pilgrimage. Gandhi, who had stagemanaged the entire operation, once again baffled the British by pulling off a stunt with skills only a saint/politician could have possessed.

In Attenborough's rendering of the Dandi march, none of these nuances are either highlighted or even touched upon. In fact the significance of the march is de-dramatized since it is mostly filmed from a distance in order to give one the melodramatic feeling of a mounting plurality of people packed into the crowded film frames. To insist, at such a criticial historical moment, on pretty visual poetry is to deny both history and the man responsible for making it in his own unique way.

Nor does Attenborough suggest the crucial differences between Nehru and Patel. They were not so easily persuaded to fall in with Gandhi's policies as the film often shows them doing. One is appalled at times to see them portrayed as nothing but Gandhi's hangers-on, which they certainly were not.

Nehru and Gandhi had completely different ideologies as far as India's destiny was concerned. This was clearly reflected in the disputes they often had. For Gandhi, India's great strength lay in her villages. It was her villages that he felt India should return to, to feel the persistent strength of her great culture and tradition. His was a Rousseauian retreat into cottage-industry humbleness and work-ethic which, adhered to religiously, would enable India to maintain her essence "purely," especially from the corrupting Westernized forces of industrialization.

Nehru's ideology was completely antithetical. Born and educated in the lap of a Westernized aristocracy, he knew very little of the mud of an Indian village. He was a foreigner to his own people in many ways before he came under the spell of the Mahatma, and often continued to be one in spite of it. Unlike Gandhi, he was vehemently irreligious and did not at all believe in Gandhi's God or Hindu way of life. Nehru was a man of the cities with a face more often tilted towards the West. For him the ideal Indian base would not be found in the villages but in urban industry and commerce. It was machines that Nehru wanted, not ancient ploughs.

The link between the two men, as most historians have rightly noted, was emotional rather than on the planes of ideas or intellect. Nehru was like a mischievous son to Gandhi and Gandhi adored and protected him like one.

Patel, unlike Nehru, sprang from native Indian soil. His Gujerati father had been a peasant and had instilled in him a fierce nationalistic sense of service to his country. All his life Patel believed only in one ideal—the freedom of his country. When Gandhi's voice seeped into his consciousness, one night, at his habitual bridge-game table in an Ahmedabad club, he abandoned the table and his flourishing legal practice to follow the Mahatma.

If Nehru had captured Gandhi's fatherly heart, Patel captured Gandhi's shrewd legal and political mind. It was Patel's single-mindedness, his organizational skills and his lack of emotional hysteria under stress that Gandhi sought, found and exploited. Patel had stern qualities of leadership that enabled him to implement Gandhi's political strategies like a well-oiled machine. But he was a very stubborn man who wanted things done his way, and often clashed with Gandhi and Nehru when they tried to propose other alternatives. Like Nehru he scoffed openly at Gandhi's agrarian principles though he was very much opposed to Nehru's affinity with the West.

What united them was their abiding sense of service and sacrifice, but both Nehru and Patel should have been developed as separate entities before they could be shown as coming under Gandhi's spell. Having failed to establish these crucial individual relationships, the film becomes even less credible when grandiose attempts are made to convey Gandhi's mesmeric impact on the Indian multitude. The naive manner in which Attenborough attempts this is by constantly depicting Gandhi's oneness with the Indian people through the bewilderment of the British. They become for Attenborough very convenient dramatic crutches which the story of the khadi-clad prophet can hobble upon.

Every time Gandhi steps out of a train in the Indian landscape and millions converge from the neighboring countryside chanting: "Mahatma Gandhi ki jai," ("Cheers for Saint

Gandhi"), Attenborough's clumsy camera zooms in immediately on the nearest perplexed British observer present—be he soldier, judge, observer of any kind whatsoever but *always* white-skinned, looking on in amazement and murmuring: "Now what in blazes is this Ghandy chap up to?"

Thematically, this kind of a device prepares the audience for a "Messiah" approach to Gandhi from the moment he steps foot on Indian soil. It is made most obvious in that clumsy scene when Gandhi is introduced for the first time in the gardens of Rashtrapati Bhavan to the Nationalist leaders. One of them, Lokmaniya Tilak, takes Gandhi aside and tells him: "Thank God you have arrived. Now I can sleep in peace." Scenes like these show Gandhi as being baptised into the Indian freedom struggle as some kind of a deity appointed by history to throw out the British invaders. It also denigrades the contributions of so many other freedom fighters who had commenced their struggle long before Gandhi arrived on the scene. The point that Attenborough repeatedly misses is that Gandhi was more of a catalyst rather than the seer or the prophet that he makes him out to be.

All this stands out clearly in Gandhi's autobiography—whose title alone, *"The Story of my Experiments with Truth,"* is a relevant indicator of a man who had the superb courage to find truth, not always (as Attenborough's film so stubbornly and often misleadingly indicates) in the bright sun of public life but also in the dark cavities of the self's own pettiness and inadequacies. It was for this that Gandhi tried out daring experiments in sexual abstinence, vegetarianism, subjecting his body and soul to rigorous tests. He repeatedly failed but he never gave up. And when he did succeed he made that individual success into a precept that could be utilized for the good of a collective whole. Attenborough neglects this crucial aspect and replaces it with the vision of a Gandhi splendidly conscious of himself as a humble naked old man who, even when he is sitting with a mud-pack on his head or milking his goat, is confident that he is shaking the mighty British empire by sheer spiritual power.

Gandhi's constant publications in the press, his way of charming Western journalists to make India's concerns known the world over, his staging of certain political events in public—like the burning of British cloth—all of these were shrewdly calculated acts which he did to exasperate the British, raise Indian morale and astonish the world. This aspect of Gandhi comes through quite convincingly in the film. Gandhi's relationship with the American photographer Margaret Bourke White (Candice Bergen) is in fact the one valid relationship that manages to work extremely well in the film. The warmth in their friendship has none of the clichéd Hindu husband-wife obedience pattern (Rohini Hattangadi as Kasturba, Gandhi's wife, apart from an early violent scene where she refuses to wash the toilets in Gandhi's ashram, has strangely no significant role to play) or the hackneyed master-disciple relationship that Attenborough shows between Gandhi and Mirabehn (the wealthy Englishwoman who joined him and remained with him throughout his life).

For Margaret Bourke White, Gandhi becomes a creation for her camera, an image that she can transform into a metaphor for the sake of the world on the glossy cover of *Life* magazine. Gandhi, aware of this, submits willingly, cleverly realizing his opportunity to put India on the world's map. But time and time again he fractures the nimbus of saintliness that White tries to impose on him as he poses for her camera. Just before he goes to his death, he turns round and fires his last charming shot at her. "You are a temptress, my dear," he tells her, "and for an old man like me, that's dangerous."

As a film-maker recreating certain epic historical events, Attenborough's favorite device to make them cinematically alive is a ponderous staging of the event through ascending layers of melodramatic excess. The Jallianwalla Bagh massacre scene, or the American journalist Walker's (Martin Sheen's) exposure to nonviolence at a factory strike are stagy, badly edited and hopelessly orchestrated. One can actually see many of the extras, portraying the supposed victims of General O'Dyer's murderous onslaught at Jallianwalla Bagh, thoroughly *enjoying* the filmed event as though it was one big picnic-romp!

Attenborough's tendency toward melodrama is at its worst in the simplistic manner in which he treats Gandhi's famous strategy of going on an indefinite fast. The fast that Attenborough concentrates on is the one Gandhi undertook in Calcutta to bring about

a cessation of the terribly bloody riots between the Hindus and the Muslims just after partition. Fasts were a compelling weapon that Gandhi often used to bring back sanity to peoples' enflamed thoughts and emotions, to make them face new concepts and most importantly, to make them atone for their lapses, thereby saving the lives of thousands of innocent human beings who might have been slaughtered in the white heat of communal hatred.

Attenborough turns Gandhi's exercise into a ritual of bathos. As Gandhi lies, crumpled and sad on his little cot, an impoverished Hindu (Om Puri) whose son has been butchered by the Muslims bursts on the scene, throws a piece of bread on Gandhi and hysterically admonishes him to "Eat! Eat!" Gandhi's reaction is to give a severe lecture to the unfortunate Hindu, telling him that he will only eat his bread if the other man promises to adopt a Muslim child as his new son, at which moment the Hindu breaks down and cries. To crude farce is now added unabashed sentimentality as the rest of the sullen Muslim detractors, also present, drop their weapons as though on cue.

What saves such scenes, and many others in the film, is the wonderful performance of Ben Kingsley in the title role. The metamorphosis that he achieves from the frock-coated lawyer of South Africa to the "half-naked fakir" of the Mahatma in India is extraordinary. Kingsley's artistry carries with it a wonderful sense of responsibility. He recreates very movingly Gandhi's complete rejection of Westernization once his ideology and goal had crystallized themselves in his soul. To take the soul into the most difficult realm of absolute simplicity is not an easy task. Gandhi's rejection was much more than the simple exchange of symbols—a khadi-spun cloth from frock-coat, hat and golden buttons. This change, as Kingsley portrays it, radiates itself through his changing *being*. It is not an old skin which is shed. It is the inner sanctity of an extraordinary man that Kingsley makes so marvellously luminous. His eyes, shining through tiny grandfather spectacles, his bewitching smile, his vocabulary, rolling with India's diverse speech rhythms and singsong cadences emerges as superb transformations. The British accent of his South African upbringing gradually disappears. The clipped English sense of humor takes on gleeful Indian tones of mischief. The small compact body with the healthy cheeks and abundant hair of the successful lawyer gradually shrinks and becomes emaciated as the burden of a huge Indian continent falls across its narrow frame. It is *for* this and *in* this alone that Kingsley has been successful in *his* personal homage to the Mahatma. His contribution, so clearly isolated from Attenborough's hype and simplification, shows resoundingly an actor's overwhelming triumph over a director's repeated failure to come to terms with his subject. —DARIUS COOPER

NOTE

1. Joan Bondurant, *Conquest of Violence: The Gandhian Philosophy of Conflict* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1958) pp. vi–vii.

FITZCARRALDO

Written and directed by Werner Herzog. Camera: Thom Mauch. Music: Popul Voh, Enrico Caruso, Richard Strauss. Produced by Herzog and Lucki Stipetic. New World Pictures.

Fitzcarraldo—the film, not the mystique—was the victim of an excess of prior publicity. The film was heralded by years of bad news, generating cineastic legend. Just to name the highlights, or lowlights: after rumors spread that Werner Herzog was going to work them to the bone and steal their land, even boil them down into lard, angry Amazonian Indians drove him and his crew from their first encampment. Jack Nicholson and Warren Oates fell through as stars of choice; their excellent replacement, Jason Robards, took sick with dysentery, and had to withdraw after considerable film had already been shot. His co-star, Mick Jagger, also withdrew to meet prior obligations, and Herzog decided to write his character out of the script altogether. With the biggest box-office draws gone, financing began to fall apart. Eventually Herzog turned to Klaus Kinski to play the Irishman Fitzcarraldo, and moved his entire operation 1500 miles into the jungle to stimulate the edginess of his actors. The rainy season was unusually intense, unusually long. Passing through territory controlled by another tribe of Indians, crew members were attacked and wounded by arrows.

a cessation of the terribly bloody riots between the Hindus and the Muslims just after partition. Fasts were a compelling weapon that Gandhi often used to bring back sanity to peoples' enflamed thoughts and emotions, to make them face new concepts and most importantly, to make them atone for their lapses, thereby saving the lives of thousands of innocent human beings who might have been slaughtered in the white heat of communal hatred.

Attenborough turns Gandhi's exercise into a ritual of bathos. As Gandhi lies, crumpled and sad on his little cot, an impoverished Hindu (Om Puri) whose son has been butchered by the Muslims bursts on the scene, throws a piece of bread on Gandhi and hysterically admonishes him to "Eat! Eat!" Gandhi's reaction is to give a severe lecture to the unfortunate Hindu, telling him that he will only eat his bread if the other man promises to adopt a Muslim child as his new son, at which moment the Hindu breaks down and cries. To crude farce is now added unabashed sentimentality as the rest of the sullen Muslim detractors, also present, drop their weapons as though on cue.

What saves such scenes, and many others in the film, is the wonderful performance of Ben Kingsley in the title role. The metamorphosis that he achieves from the frock-coated lawyer of South Africa to the "half-naked fakir" of the Mahatma in India is extraordinary. Kingsley's artistry carries with it a wonderful sense of responsibility. He recreates very movingly Gandhi's complete rejection of Westernization once his ideology and goal had crystallized themselves in his soul. To take the soul into the most difficult realm of absolute simplicity is not an easy task. Gandhi's rejection was much more than the simple exchange of symbols—a khadi-spun cloth from frock-coat, hat and golden buttons. This change, as Kingsley portrays it, radiates itself through his changing *being*. It is not an old skin which is shed. It is the inner sanctity of an extraordinary man that Kingsley makes so marvellously luminous. His eyes, shining through tiny grandfather spectacles, his bewitching smile, his vocabulary, rolling with India's diverse speech rhythms and singsong cadences emerges as superb transformations. The British accent of his South African upbringing gradually disappears. The clipped English sense of humor takes on gleeful Indian tones of mischief. The small compact body with the healthy cheeks and abundant hair of the successful lawyer gradually shrinks and becomes emaciated as the burden of a huge Indian continent falls across its narrow frame. It is *for* this and *in* this alone that Kingsley has been successful in *his* personal homage to the Mahatma. His contribution, so clearly isolated from Attenborough's hype and simplification, shows resoundingly an actor's overwhelming triumph over a director's repeated failure to come to terms with his subject. —DARIUS COOPER

NOTE

1. Joan Bondurant, *Conquest of Violence: The Gandhian Philosophy of Conflict* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1958) pp. vi–vii.

FITZCARRALDO

Written and directed by Werner Herzog. Camera: Thom Mauch. Music: Popul Voh, Enrico Caruso, Richard Strauss. Produced by Herzog and Lucki Stipetic. New World Pictures.

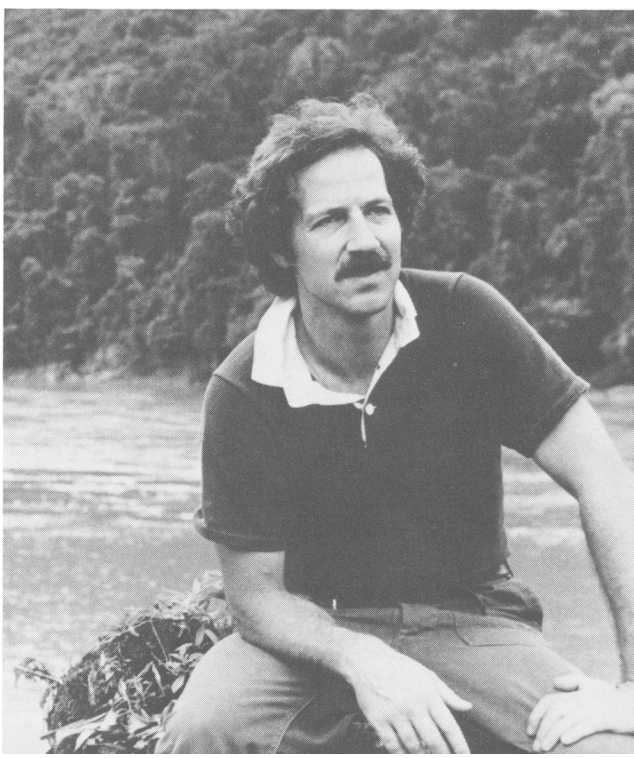
Fitzcarraldo—the film, not the mystique—was the victim of an excess of prior publicity. The film was heralded by years of bad news, generating cineastic legend. Just to name the highlights, or lowlights: after rumors spread that Werner Herzog was going to work them to the bone and steal their land, even boil them down into lard, angry Amazonian Indians drove him and his crew from their first encampment. Jack Nicholson and Warren Oates fell through as stars of choice; their excellent replacement, Jason Robards, took sick with dysentery, and had to withdraw after considerable film had already been shot. His co-star, Mick Jagger, also withdrew to meet prior obligations, and Herzog decided to write his character out of the script altogether. With the biggest box-office draws gone, financing began to fall apart. Eventually Herzog turned to Klaus Kinski to play the Irishman Fitzcarraldo, and moved his entire operation 1500 miles into the jungle to stimulate the edginess of his actors. The rainy season was unusually intense, unusually long. Passing through territory controlled by another tribe of Indians, crew members were attacked and wounded by arrows.

Herzog's agon continued to play out a double mystique, blending the imperial adventures of the sixteenth century with Romantic dreams of the nineteenth. To advance so deeply into the jungle, the wasteland, the bush, to hack some lasting good out of the harsh Otherness of Nature, the twentieth-century cultural conquistador had to pay the price for his hubris. Worse yet, the crew and the Indians had to pay it too, laboring under the burden of Werner Herzog's dreams. And curiously, only that price seemed to confirm that the adventure was right and worthwhile in the first place. (German Romantics know that the magnitude of the ordeal is pure testimony to the value of the objective.) The historical Fitzgerald, called Fitzcarraldo, wanted to build an opera house in the Amazon rubber-boom town of Iquitos so that his hero, Caruso, could be induced to visit. He would pay for this exercise in Kultur and enlightenment by hauling a dismantled steamboat over a mountain between two river systems, enabling him to get around an otherwise impassable rapids. He hired hundreds of Indians to dismantle and transport the boat, then reassemble it below the rapids to get the jump on a previously undeveloped rubber business. Herzog went Fitzcarraldo one better. *His* Indians would haul *his* steamboat over the mountain intact. It would weight ten times Fitzcarraldo's, and they would put it up a grade twice as steep as Fitzcarraldo's, 40 degrees—over oozing mud, no less, as it turned out. They used a specially installed winch and pulley system designed to pull much less weight at a much less steep angle. When Herzog insisted on going ahead, the Brazilian engineer who had designed and installed the system quit, telling him it was reckless, with a solid chance that someone would die in the attempt. During the actual haul, a cable did snap, though miraculously no one was killed. Pauline Kael later wrote in *The New Yorker* that Herzog had risked lives just to get a real-life shot of the boat filling the diagonal of his frame.

Truly this saga seemed German Romanticism run amok, imperial conquest stuck in the mud and hell-bent on storming its way through to the other side. Herzog seemed to have been transmuted into his own wrathful Aguirre, bound for dubious glory as he marched lesser beings into the desolate night of his all-or-nothing vision. Beneath the distracted visage of Kinski's Fitzcarraldo could be detected the monstrous goggle eyes of Kinski's *Aguirre, Wrath of God,* dragging his own conquistadorial crew to destruction in the name of some unspeakable lust of the blood, some crazed compulsion to drive his spirit beyond civilization. With all this, it seemed Herzog's film was bound to disappear beneath the enormity of his own living legend.

And to make matters worse for Herzog, by the time *Fitzcarraldo* got onto the American screen, Les Blank's fine documentary *Burden of Dreams*—the title of which I've already referred to in passing—had already played several major cities; an earlier version had been shown on public television. Not only did Blank catch Herzog's catastrophes on camera, but he caught Herzog himself in his full darkness. In one memorable sequence, late in the film, Herzog fulminates against the very Nature he went halfway around the world to find. Just as the Romantic identifies with Nature's unspoiled qualities, its wildness or peace, now the thwarted Herzog inverts the image, and some decidedly unpretty themes leap out of the German past: "I see fornication and asphyxiation and choking and fighting for survival and growing and rotting. The trees here are in misery. The birds here are in misery—they don't sing, they just shriek in pain.

BURDEN OF DREAMS: *Herzog in the jungle*



Erotic? No! There is an overwhelming fornication! There is a curse on this landscape, and whoever goes too deep into it has a share of this curse! We are cursed for what we are doing here! It is a land that god, if He exists, has created in anger! There is no order here, no harmony in the universe! The only harmony is of overwhelming, collective murder! It is a vile, base obscenity! We don't belong here! There is an overwhelming lack of order! Even the stars here are a mess. They have no constellations. They just have chaos. There is no harmony! I hate it!"

Thus does the defeated Romantic surrender to his underside, and the worst of it is that Herzog doesn't know he's inveighing against the negative image of a Paradise he carried in his own heart—the projected Mother turned Monster. Onto the wildness of Nature he projects the raging chaos of his own heart, the disorder of his own desires. But despite this self-revelation, or because of it, *Burden of Dreams* remains a tribute to Herzog, in the end, because it honors and recapitulates Herzog's project by plunging deep into the jungle to record its ordeal. Despite obvious differences between the two film-makers, Les Blank is to Herzog as Herzog is to the historical Fitzcarraldo: a devoted though distanced tributary. After seeing *Burden of Dreams* and watching Herzog's agon unfold, it was easy to expect that *Fitzcarraldo* would prove anticlimactic.

Several critics found it so, and worse. Pauline Kael denounced Herzog not only for "playing Pharaoh" but making a dull, flat movie to boot. To the contrary, I found the film enormously exciting, gorgeous, moving, mysterious, and—despite certain improbabilities of plot and character—thought-provoking. This is not to say that *Fitzcarraldo* was "worth" the dangers to which Herzog made his cast and crew submit; such a cost-benefit calculus is beyond my ken. But there is a single element that, to me, summarizes *Fitzcarraldo*'s achievement and lifts the film beyond the fascination of the story of its making. It's the ending of the film, neglected by the reviews, which carries a meaning that transcends Herzog's agon and its moral ambiguities.

To recapitulate *Fitzcarraldo*'s plot-line now would be redundant and useless. It would only bore people who've seen the film, and couldn't perform any useful service for people who haven't and might want to, since the film is no longer in general release. But the essential points are simple to recite. To realize his wild vision, Fitzcarraldo drives the Indians beyond endurance. Believing him to be their long-promised White God, they go along with the ordeal. But once the boat is hauled over the mountain, the Indians have other ideas. Before Fitzcarraldo has a chance to exploit the rubber which was the object of the whole voyage, the Indians cut the boat loose and it careens into the very rapids which the whole venture was meant to avoid. The boat survives, terribly battered, but now it is back below the rapids—without rubber, without capital. Herzog's original story for *Fitzcarraldo* (Fjord Press, San Francisco, $8.00) says: "And as the boat drifts towards us, having survived the inferno, we have time to let a terrible thought germinate . . . *everything was to no avail* . . . The dream is over, all was in vain. In a single night, eight months of exertion are rendered null and void."

But what, then, is the point of *Herzog*'s story? What meaning can Fitzcarraldo find in this catastrophe? It turns out that all the while Fitzcarraldo was running the expedition to the tune of his dream, the Indians were pursuing their own dream-script. "They say they always knew our boat, the divine vessel, was only dragged over the mountain so it could drift through the rapids," the captain tells Fitzcarraldo. "They say it was necessary, that they had been waiting for this since the time of their forefathers, it was necessary to reconcile the evil spirits of the rapids."

The conquistador has met his match; he has defeated nature but been defeated nevertheless. Momentarily, he's crushed. But Fitzcarraldo rises to the occasion just as Herzog had to. Back in Iquitos, Fitzcarraldo learns that a European opera company is giving a performance nearby! Then comes his flash of inspiration, which is also Herzog's way of redeeming his ordeal and making sense of it. In the lavish, sensuous closing scene, as the entire population gathers at the waterfront in amazement and pleasure, he stages a one-time-only performance of Bellini's *I Puritani*—on a flotilla of boats. (In Herzog's original story, the opera was to be *Die Walküre,* done in full Teutonic regalia, perhaps to indulge

Klaus Kinski as Fitzcarraldo—triumphant in Iquitos after his opera

and close out the Wagnerian Romantic dream at the same time, as Hans Jürgen Syberberg has tried to do with his *Parsifal.* Perhaps Herzog thought better of the Wagner because the symbolism would have been just too thick.) The camera swoops around and among the boats, enacting its own lyric, as the visiting opera singers fill the harbor of Iquitos with the sensuous best of Western culture, and Fitzcarraldo basks in pure pleasure.

This is what Fitzcarraldo has learned from the Indians: the important thing is not to secure property (the rubber, the boat), but to recognize how small are these things in the eyes of the gods. And perhaps this is what Herzog, like a good American transcendentalist, has learned as well. Culture is not to be *founded* on real property, but rather *found* in the fugitive here-and-now moment when something wonderful is accomplished for the immediate delectation. This is the hedonist's version of T. S. Eliot's mystical "fitful moment in and out of time," where transcendence takes place. The adventurer's real reward isn't a permanent colonial implantation, however happily cultural, but an ephemeral gift that floats and glimmers in the sun. This is neither chaos nor *Ordnung,* but the glory of the human scale. Far from being what Pauline Kael called a "token of a finish," Fitzcarraldo's epiphany is the point of the whole movie, the revelation that suggests that culture isn't a thing that has to be wrested from nature at the cost of blood. This is what sets *Fitzcarraldo* apart from *Aguirre,* and makes it more mature work.

From the beginning of his career, Herzog has been courting danger in alien territory, throwing the solitary self against the raw, remote elements: the occupied Greek countryside in *Signs of Life,* Africa in *Fata Morgana,* the Martinique volcano in *La Soufrière,* Peru in *Aguirre* and *Fitzcarraldo.* Society, where it exists at all, is as demonic and unforgiving as Nature: its compulsions punish the innocent human spirit, as in *Heart of Glass, Kaspar Hauser,* and *Stroszek. Fitzcarraldo* stands for something else, a new turn for Herzog, in which society can admire something lovely, and culture can literally float on Nature. Granted, it is an idealized society in which

small children of the Amazon basin are transfixed by the recorded voice of Enrico Caruso, and respectable robber barons, prostitutes, and the rest of the town turn out *en masse* to behold the wonders of culture. Society, which was brutal and uncomprehending in Herzog's earlier work, now unites to understand and accept all. After the storms and chaos of the journey, after transgressing limits, Western man makes his peace with nature, culture, and alien society all at once. But Herzog's benign Utopia doesn't lord it over anyone else. After many years of imagining social claustrophobia and escape into cruel Nature, Herzog has extracted from disaster a lovely vision of rapprochement. At a grim moment in our culture, this is no small conquest.

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Flower Films

10341 SAN PABLO AVENUE
EL CERRITO, CA 94530
415-525-0942

SMITHEREENS

Produced and directed by Susan Seidelman. Script: Ron Nyswander and Peter Askins. Photography: Chirene El Khadem. Music: Glenn Mercer and Bill Million. New Line Cinema.

Susan Seidelman's *Smithereens* has become a postmodern classic, winning prizes not only at such film festivals as Cannes and Telluride but also turning into a hit at the box offices of alternative movie theaters in the Village as well as outside New York. Commenting on her film, Seidelman told an interviewer, "I wanted to people the film with characters who were products of the mass culture of the 1970's and 80's, kids who grew up on rock and roll" (*The New York Times,* December 26, 1982). The film, however, is not, as Seidelman seems to imply, a disinterested study of the contemporary scene although she does her best, by using a rather humorous and at times even affectionate idiom in her presentation of events and people, not to sound didactic and ideological. *Smithereen's* ostensible object is a portrayal of punk rock music and its subculture, but its actual subject matter, as she admits in the same interview, is the view of reality and moral vision lying behind the postmodern arts and held by their practitioners. "When people's values get perverted," she observes, "the products they create reflect perverted values." Her goal is thus to expose the prevailing perversions and, by doing so, help to restore a sense of moral health to the arts and community. The outcome is a frightened film that conceals its insecurities in jokes and ironic statements and projects a nostalgic moral universe rooted in the political conservatism that has swept Europe and the United States since the late seventies.

The realistic cinematography of the film is itself in a sense an aesthetic dramatization of its moral and political conservatism and its hankering after domesticity, common sense and other middle-class proprieties. This realism, however, like its ideological conservatism, is a rather sophisticated one that is not only aware of the experimentation of such directors as Godard, Truffaut and Fassbinder but is also quite knowledgeable about the narratological economies of such modes as cartoons. *Smithereens's* realism is, in other words, a post-experimental mimesis—a realism that acknowledges innovative and non-mimetic cinematography but, boldly and humorously,

small children of the Amazon basin are transfixed by the recorded voice of Enrico Caruso, and respectable robber barons, prostitutes, and the rest of the town turn out *en masse* to behold the wonders of culture. Society, which was brutal and uncomprehending in Herzog's earlier work, now unites to understand and accept all. After the storms and chaos of the journey, after transgressing limits, Western man makes his peace with nature, culture, and alien society all at once. But Herzog's benign Utopia doesn't lord it over anyone else. After many years of imagining social claustrophobia and escape into cruel Nature, Herzog has extracted from disaster a lovely vision of rapprochement. At a grim moment in our culture, this is no small conquest.

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rejects it in favor of a no-nonsense and seemingly straightforward presentation of the narrative subject. Seidelman's film, in many respects, resembles the fiction of such recent American writers as Ann Beattie, Raymond Carver and Jayne Anne Phillips. These writers introduce a new form of realism which demonstrates a high degree of awareness about the innovative works of such radical contemporaries as John Barth and Donald Barthelme but moves toward a reappropriation of traditional realism—especially in its view of reality as ultimately non-linguistic in nature. Beattie's fiction, Seidelman's film and the neorealistic paintings of William Bailey and Philip Pearlstein all point to a new development in postmodern American arts: a desire to restore mimesis. Such an aesthetic move is motivated, as was mentioned before, by the political climate of recent years and its overriding imperative to bring back the order of the pragmatic and familiar and expel all modes of alterity. Alterity and otherness are in fact equated in the film with frivolity—another term, in the idiom of the film, for immorality and a disregard for the fundamental categories of communal reality, a disregard that eventually leads to disguised chaos and substitutes for the genuine version of reality a faked, pretended and thus illegitimate one. The dominant "moral" perspective in the film, however, is in the last instance, as will be shown below, a mystification of a particular economic order.

The notion of faked reality is thematized rather powerfully in *Smithereens* and is in fact violently introduced into the film at the very beginning of the narrative. The film opens with the camera focusing on a huge pair of black-and-white op-art sunglasses dangling from the hands of a woman who is evidently absorbed in observing the scene in a New York subway. The screen is, for a few moments, almost totally occupied by these glasses, which through close-ups overwhelm the audience and forcefully pose the question of the perception and interpretation of reality in the film. The dangling sunglasses are suddenly "ripped off" by a young woman, a would-be punk groupie, who, having taken them, runs through the maze of the subway and on entering the world above-ground wears them. Her face is thus marked as a site of falsehood, covered up by the illegitimately obtained screen of dark glasses. This illegitimacy, which is the illegitimacy of disorder represented in the act of theft that violates the birthright of the bourgeois to hold private property, is equated by the end of the film with the mode of reality proposed by contemporary punk rock and, by extension, other forms of unconventionality and otherness.

The phony and inauthentic life lived by the sunglasses thief—the heroine of the film, Wren—is further dramatized by her seemingly absurd act of pasting pictures of herself inscribed with the enigmatic question: WHO IS THIS GIRL? all over lower Manhattan. It is a Warholian gesture echoed in her job: she works in a photocopy center and her life, it is suggested, like her job is characterized by re-production instead of production; it is a copy, a non-original and secondary effect which depends on a primary term. The photocopy center is a place for the reproduction of images, and Wren's only preoccupation in her life is with images and surfaces. She is a talentless woman (she wants to join a group of punk rock musicians but does not know how to sing or play any musical instrument) who is driven by a set of signs of media celebrities and hype —swimming pools, fans and autographs.

Wren's narcissism, however, goes far beyond an innocent and harmless pasting of photocopies of herself all over the city; she is, as Paul, her antithesis in the film, tells her, morally deficient: she is so absorbed in herself that she cannot respond to other people and have any genuine concern for them. People matter to her only in so far as they can be useful to her and feed her ego. She is, in short, dehumanized by "hype," the collective falsehood of postmodern culture which is itself seen as an illegitimate usurper of the self-cohering and totalizing culture of modernism. Her mind is so numbed by the postmodern synthetic reality produced by media and popular culture that it is a mere unassorted jumble of opinions, dreams, impressions and fantasies without the maturity to recognize the adult boundaries between the real and the dreamed up. What is even more frightening about her is that not only does she lack the sophistication to see the shallowness of her beliefs and recognize that she lives in fantasies pathologically severed from communal reality but she pursues them with absurd

single-mindedness. Her indifference to the actual human predicament and her inability to appreciate the subtle negotiation of the real in any complex human situation gives her thoughts and acts a raw quality and brutal tone that the film expands and associates with contemporary punk rock. The crude, narcissistic and relentless pursuit of power, which marks punk rock music, is seen in the film as the underlying order in the night clubs and bars that Wren and the others frequent and, in the last instance, shapes their relationships. This barbarous search for power is, in the moral idiom of the film, a mode of fascism characterizing the contemporary music scene and, by extension, other forms of avant-garde art. Punk music is viewed, in other words, ultimately as a form of fascism that appeals only to powerless youths who are feeble-minded enough to take its claims seriously and who hope that by submitting themselves to it to gain some sort of (self) visibility. Like other modes of fascism, it is embedded in violence. Although Wren's language, body movements and gestures as well as her contacts with the people around her all hint at this violence, the person who is its perfect embodiment is Wren's object of adulation, Eric.

Eric is first seen in the film getting out of a cab in front of a bar in which Wren and Paul, the quiet painter, end up spending their first date. Stepping out onto the curb, Eric grabs the purse from a young blonde woman who is in the taxi and orders the driver to take her away. The woman leans out of the window, screaming, "I hate your guts!" at Eric as the cab pulls out. Later on in the film, in a desolate moment when Wren is knocking on Eric's empty apartment door, we learn that the blonde (who remains nameless in the film) is Eric's wife. To Wren, Eric represents freedom and creativity—he has cut an album called "Smithereens," a year or so ago—but the film presents him as just another phony artist who is unable to create anything of artistic value and all his waking hours are spent swindling admiring women (including Wren) and engaging in what he calls "business deals." Brutality and emotional violence are the only terms by which Eric relates to the world. His cruelty is imagistically summed up in one of the most expressive scenes of the film in which he leaves the cafe where Wren and one of his other women friends start fighting over him. While they are rolling on the floor pulling each other's hair, Eric, his mouth full of the food paid for by the woman now being attacked by Wren, walks away. His handsome face seen through the cafe window in a close-up shot from inside is lean, evil and snickering, amused by the fight. Wren confuses Eric's violence with artistic power, and this in the film is testimony to her moral and imaginative naïveté. Her desire to become a groupie is in fact a sign of her inner insecurity since, like other followers of fascism, she adores power because she is herself so powerless.

The ultimate passivity of Wren's mind—the underside of the powerseeking fascistic personality—and her inability to analyze ideas and sort out competing views in her mind is visually portrayed in a rather amusing but very effective series of shots of her pad—a room full of scattered clothes, empty food boxes, an unmade bed and a small portable television set which follows her throughout the film like a pet animal. The TV set repeats her total saturation with "hype" and at the same time her complete separation from any sustaining human contact. She soon is denied even this confused and confusing space when her landlady locks her out of the apartment for nonpayment of her rent. In a scene in the hallway we see the old, decent, hardworking landlady sweeping the floor and Wren trying to persuade her to let her into the apartment since she "will be paid tomorrow by 10 o'clock." In a matter of two or three minutes the audience sees Wren using a range of verbal tricks from sweet talking to threatening to abusing the landlady (strategies which will be repeated several times in the film against her brother-in-law and even Eric). Throughout the landlady remains firm and reminds Wren of all her previous broken promises—another reminder to the audience of Wren's moral deficiencies. The audience's sympathy is with the landlady to such a degree that when, at the end of the scene, she tosses Wren's clothes onto the street and ends the ritual of throwing her out by pouring a bucket of water on her head, nothing but laughter acknowledges the act. The water symbolically acts as the pissing of the bourgeois audience on the riffraff of the earth. At the same time it serves as Wren's baptism into a world of homelessness and absolute loneliness that

eventually leads to prostitution (the ultimate symbol for the bourgeoisie of the degradation and punishment of the disobedient dissident daughter who is thus overtly placed in an exchange situation).

Between her eviction and the suggestion in the last freeze frame hinting at her future life as a whore, Wren is subjected to an unending series of humiliations and ridicule. For instance, while calling on her sister and brother-in-law in an effort to borrow some money, Wren at first gets rather angry, but soon her anger disappears and she becomes a rather compliant woman who tries very hard to be pleasant and even starts to make small talk with her brother-in-law. The audience gets the point: Wren is a hypocrite who, in order to get things done, does not stop at anything. Her seeming desire for independence and an unconventional life is just one of her convenient poses. The same point is brought up again in Eric's pad. Getting up after a night spent with an indifferent Eric, Wren, like a sweet housewife, tries to get his attention by offering to make him breakfast. Eric, like her brother-in-law, rudely reminds her that her verbal tricks won't work. The audience meanwhile is reassured of its own moral stand and its antipathy to Wren is intensified.

Although the film, through its ironic tone and various devices of humor and visual anecdotes, tries to present itself as nondidactic, the underlying moral anger of the film toward marginal and unconventional lifestyles breaks through the façade of humor. The impatience that the film expresses toward punk rock music and other forms of experimental art is grounded in its vision of an authentic mode of living and a viable form of art which is presented in the film in the figure of a quiet, soft-spoken (genuine) artist whose "psychedelic" painted van (reminiscent of the sixties), around which Wren and other characters circulate, is the only redeeming feature of the urban wasteland.

The artist, Paul, is introduced in the film almost simultaneously with Wren as if to suggest from the very beginning a familiar alternative to the strange otherness of Wren. Paul is presented as a man of contemplation and depth who penetrates the surface of reality and reaches behind façades. Contrary to Wren he is aware of the complexities of the human situation, but unlike her and her friends this

SMITHEREENS: *Wren after her eviction*

knowledge does not lead to moral and intellectual helplessness—the blankness of the rock musician. Paul is a "real" artist: a portrait painter who archetypically represents the artist to the middle-class. But for the bourgeoisie the portrait painter is not merely an artist, a person with enviable skills in depicting the marvels of human features; he is also a man of perception and vision—a sage who inscribes an interpretation within the reflection of reality his art creates. His paintings are thus an informed mode of interpretive mimesis, and the audience is to understand that this is the same aesthetic mode in which the film itself is conceived.

Although Paul is located in the postmodern world (his van is parked at a symbolic site in the "wasteland" of a junk strewn abandoned lot), he is not situated in it: his vision of reality is pastoral as he stops over in New York on his way from Montana to New Hampshire. A detached observer of the busy-ness and hustle of the contemporary world, he is able to see through it and express its futility. When he is with Wren in the bar, for example, his body contracts in reaction to the phoniness of those around him, and his recurring request to Wren is "Let's get out of here," "Can we get out of here?" It is this knowledge of the inauthentic and futile that makes him a real threat to those who come into contact with him—all are worried that they may be "found out" and "discovered" to be wanting. As the film progresses, the knowing innocence that surrounds Paul increases and becomes charged with religious overtones so much so that the local pimp finds (Saint) Paul's presence in the neighborhood a menacing sign and several times tries to drive him out by offering to buy his van. The van is of course to be purchased ostensibly as a mobile headquarters and lounge

for his "girls," but actually it is to get rid of Paul. Paul is the symbol of clarity, harmony and understanding and his van represents a sanctuary of comfort and succor which the film demonstrates by showing one of the prostitutes taking refuge in his van from the bitter cold night while Paul talks with her about her mother, home and homemade food.

For Wren, however, Paul's van is merely a negative space, a site of survival and nothing more. When she arrives at the van tired, depressed and exhausted after having been thrown out of her apartment and denied help and shelter by all whom she thought would accommodate her, Paul provides her with shelter, tries to comfort her and make her aware of the larger contexts of life. But she is, as might be expected, ungrateful, insensitive and, of course, selfish. She is, in the idiom of the film, using Paul, a fact that is made even more evident by the erratic pattern of her nightly visits: she comes "home" late or on some nights does not return at all. Paul's van is only a last resort to fall back on when she cannot find more "desirable" companions. Paul, also as might be expected, is understanding, kind and above all patient-looking and puts up with Wren's obnoxious behavior and disparaging comments about his previous girlfriend or his ideal living space, i.e., New Hampshire.

The symbolic opposition of Wren (the thief) and Paul (the sage) thus provides the ground for the perception of reality in *Smithereens:* Paul is the insightful artist in touch with himself and the elemental power of nature and informed by deep human emotions, whereas Wren is full of TV artifice, attracted and constructed by media hype. Paul is the spiritual man who is not corrupted by carnal knowledge (like an innocent boy, in one of the scenes that take place in his van, Paul peeks at Wren's breasts while she sleeps); Wren, on the other hand, is the urban materialist, promiscuous and exploitative. The world is seen as a site of contrasting terms, namely the spiritual and physical and their various manifestations in equally binary pairs like moral/immoral; innocent/promiscuous; sensitive/insensitive; giving/taking; selfless/selfish. Such binarism is an ideological construct based on the ultimate privileging of the first term (spiritual) and suppression of the other (physical). This opposition, which provides the enabling conditions for the film's view of reality, is actually not as viable as the film assumes, and on closer examination, one can see how the warring forces, which are projected as separate from each other, are indeed inscribed within one another. Paul is, in the last analysis, quite similar to Wren, and what is presented as "spiritual" in the film is already itself constructed by the "physical." The two opposing terms that provide the film's ontological ground, in other words, are not as distinguishable as the film pretends, and in the absence of distinct separate terms, the system of reality upon which the moral universe of the narrative is built falls apart, revealing the ultimate economic and political metaphysics of the film. But of course the film does its best to conceal this ideology and to present its terms, in the figures of Wren and Paul, as morally opposed.

Paul's relationship with the world around him, like that of Wren, Eric and others, is basically one of give and take—a situation, in other words, of "exchange." But it is part of the metaphysics of the film that his relationship with the world and people around him is mystified by situating him outside the sphere of exchange. As part of this mystification, for example, we never see Paul in anyway related or adjacent to financial matters. We don't even learn how he actually earns his living. All we are given to understand is that he *has* money. He is a painter, but, unlike Wren, Eric and the others, who are engaged in menial work or resort to thievery or the constant search for someone to fund their projects and provide them with some form of financial support, he never works, steals or talks about "business deals." Again unlike Wren and Eric who are stuck in New York because lack of money prevents them from going to their utopia, LA, Paul is at liberty to go to his utopia, New Hampshire, whenever he wants. It is for him a matter of desire not monetary consideration.

In spite of such powerful acts of diverting and concealing, Paul, on a closer look, is exposed as being fully and completely involved in the same rules of exchange. In fact it is Wren who has placed herself outside the situation of exchange and is thus "punished" for

it by the film. Quite contrary to the intention of the film, the terms are reversed and the ground upon which the theory of reality of the film is based is revealed to be not a moral one (spiritual/material) but an economic one. Paul is presented as proving shelter and friendship for Wren without any ulterior motive or any expectations—just out of the goodness of his heart. Paul's apparent lack of purely sexual interest in Wren emphasizes this idealistic relationship. However, Paul needs Wren as much as she, the film suggests, needs him. His dependence on Wren and his expectations of her are undeniable. He provides a shelter, as did the landlady, and like the landlady expects to be "paid back" although not in exactly the same terms. He does not expect "money" from Wren (he, the film has made clear, does not need money) but rather a monopoly on her "love" and "emotions." It is part of the morality of the bourgeoisie that "money" is different from "love"—the former is vulgar and the latter spiritual—so the landlady who expects money in exchange for shelter is never placed by the audience on the same level as Paul, the pure artist. But both "money" and "love" are terms of exchange. Paul expects Wren to observe these terms and respond in a responsible and "adult" fashion (i.e., adhering to the laws of the bourgeois exchange system). When she refuses to do so and continues her night life free of any obligations to (Saint) Paul, the provider, he gets angry and confronts her. He accuses her of being morally selfish. It is, nonetheless Paul who is the most selfish and not Wren; it is Paul who wants (to appropriate) Wren for himself alone, and he is, in fact, as power-seeking as Eric, Wren and all the others who are part of the punk rock scene in the film. It is precisely when his power (over Wren) is challenged by her erratic behavior, that his façade of rationality and reasonableness breaks down and his own violent nature surfaces. In one scene he is standing in front of his van in the vacant lot, Wren is sitting on a broken couch, and Paul starts lecturing her on her selfishness. As he gets more and more angry, his body loses its poise and his tone its normal calmness, while the violence that overcomes him manifests itself in his forcefully breaking pieces of wood and feeding the fire. The fire in an instant becomes the symbol

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of Paul's inner turbulence—he turns out not to be the calm man of reason but a very agitated person of unresolved emotions. The soft-spoken artist is transformed into an evangelical preacher with wrath as his source of authority.

Paul's expectations of Wren are frustrated because she does not follow the rule of middleclass behavior: responding in kind. By ignoring Paul, Wren in a sense symbolically transgresses the laws of exchange, and it is for this that she is "punished" in the film, and the whole punk rock group, which similarly places itself outside the circle of exchange, is also condemned. It turns out that Eric, Wren and the other punk followers are all in one way or the other transgressing the laws of exchange —they are takers but not givers. Wren's brother-in-law, her friend, Cecile, and almost all the other "responsible" characters with whom Wren comes into contact make this clear to her. She does not reciprocate, and for this she is thrown out of houses, pads and apartments. As if this were not clear enough, the film opens with Wren *stealing* (a pair of sunglasses), and toward the end she again *steals* (when she and Eric "roll" a tourist, leaving him penniless and pantless); Eric in turn *steals* from her (when he runs off to LA with the money they took from the tourist). This underlying notion of exchange as the regulator of all human relations is even more tellingly revealed in the next to last scene of the film. After Eric has left Wren penniless, her last resort is to again seek out Paul. Unaware that Paul too has left and his van has been purchased by the local pimp for his prostitutes, Wren opens the door of the van and unexpectedly sees the "girls" sitting around

eating, chatting and relaxing. Since this is the symbolic site in which she and Paul had made love, the sequence of acts occupying that space—Paul and Wren followed by the paid prostitutes—places them all on the same level, reminding us that they are all instances of exchange.

Syntactically this scene is used to lead to the last scene in which Wren, the rebel who has so far violated the rules of exchange by not submitting to them, is forced to acknowledge their reality and in a self-humiliating gesture accept them. The act takes place while Wren, having lost everything she had, is walking back to New Jersey—a place she had promised herself never to return to. On the bridge she is accosted by a driver who wants to pick her up. At first she ignores him, but as soon as he reminds her that she really does not have a place to go to that night, she stops and stepping back, moves toward the car. The closing freeze frame (catching her move toward the car) suggests the life waiting for her: the exchange of sex for money. The answer to the initial question, WHO IS THIS GIRL?, is now provided: SHE IS ONLY A CHEAP TRICKSTER. The answer, of course, points beyond Wren's individual predicament and becomes the film's statement about contemporary punk rock, and by extension, other modes of alterity and nonconventionality. Following a rather traditional conservative pattern of social diagnosis, *Smithereens* mystifies the actual economic and political conditions of contemporary history as "moral" issues and then singles out a particular group whose "immoral" practices are seen as the real threat to Western civilization and its values. This interpretation of contemporary history is not only entertaining but also very reassuring for middle-class audiences whose values and goals Seidelman seems to have in mind in making the film. In fact her artistic ambitions seem to be evolving around such mystifications. In her interview with the *Times* mentioned earlier, Seidelman declares her goals as a director in unequival terms, "My dream is to take the best of both worlds (i.e., Hollywood and non-Hollywood film making)." Such eclecticism, itself a reflection of the bourgeois cast of mind, can provide comforting films but not honest ones. *Smithereens* is an example.

—MAS'UD ZAVARZADEH

PONT DU NORD

(North Bridge) Directed by Jacques Rivette. Produced by Films du Losange. Written by Jacques Rivette, Suzanne Schiffman, Bulle Ogier and Pascale Ogier.

Many of the points developed by Robin Wood in his article on Jacques Rivette's *Céline et Julie Vont en Bateau* and *L'Amour Fou* (*FQ*, Fall 81) are also applicable to *Pont du Nord*. Yet, this film will probably be considered more "accessible" if only because of its length (120 minutes) and its more easily definable narrative structure. The film remains undistributed in the US.

As mysterious as the helicopter blades slashing across the first shot of *Apocalypse Now*, so are the sounds of another helicopter during the titles of *Pont du Nord* (*North Bridge*). The mystery is generated from the outset because the sounds do not refer visually to a shot of, or from, a helicopter. Rather, they relate to a concept of the city which Rivette elaborated as early as *Paris Nous Appartient* twenty years ago. That concept of the urban environment has been modified on occasion but remains essentially invested by paranoia: "they" are watching us. All of us, not just those involved with radical politics, or those who cheat on their income taxes, but all of us. Our every gesture.

Once again the city is Paris and no one has shown it as beautifully as Rivette has in his films. It is difficult to imagine Rivette in the country, or even in another city. He and Paris seem to be inseparable. From *Paris Nous Appartient* through the last trilogy of the "Daughters of Fire" (*Duelle, Noroit, Merry-go-around*), Rivette explores this street or that square, a staircase in Pigalle, a bridge on the Seine, the Place Denfert-Rochereau, the Arc de Triomphe. The city is a labyrinth (the Métro, the sewers, the catacombs) which the quest of

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Pont du Nord explores admirably. It is also a death trap, as the labyrinth was originally meant to be, and the heroine, Marie (Bulle Ogier), will find her Minotaur at its center.

Baptiste (Pascale Ogier) speeds through the city on her moped and literally runs into Marie who has recently returned to Paris from a stint in jail. Marie's claustrophobia forbids her from entering even phone booths. Baptiste, who bears all the trappings of a chic punk rocker, cannot tolerate the insistent stares of billboards and she regularly slashes their cardboard eyes with a large knife. She tags along as Marie tries to re-establish contact with her former lover Julien (Pierre Clementi) who is embroiled in some shady and dangerous business involving a briefcase. The case is soon stolen by Baptiste and its mysterious contents yield a map which will lead the two women on a cabalistic journey through Paris, dodging dangerous men (Jean-François Stévenin, Benjamin Baltimore) whom Baptiste calls the Maxes. It is these mysterious thugs whom she implicates in the conspiracy of surveillance. "They watch our every move," she tells Marie. The journey is also that of a game (Le Jeu de l'Oie) not unlike Snakes and Ladders with strange pseudo-masonic signs and scribblings. The game eventually leads them to the North Bridge (located in the city's northern suburbs) where Baptiste fights the Dragon to accede to the mastery taught to her by a Max. Marie, on the other hand, is inevitably and fatally betrayed by Julien.

The two major cross-points for Rivette are the city and cinema itself. Paris, the city par excellence, is a labyrinth where underground passages meander, an international financial center, a government seat where plots of every kind are indeed hatched. The clippings found in the briefcase relate to actual news events in French politics where truth can be as strange as fiction. No wonder that Baptiste's first words as she securely adjusts her goggles are, "It's between you and me, Babylon!" And her four-day journey through the city with Marie will take epic proportions. Her voyage of initiation resembles Perceval's quest for the Holy Grail (Pascale Ogier's first role was in Eric Rohmer's *Perceval*): Marie and Baptiste, modern Quixote and Panza.

Paris is also the city of the Surrealists. It is here that André Breton met an enigmatic young woman named Nadja. Another Surrealist writer, Philippe Soupault, wrote *The Last Nights of Paris,* a chronicle of chance meetings and odd behavior in the winter nights of the city. The city for the Surrealists was not only a magical place, it also became a living organism, a protagonist in its own right, complete with motivations, deaths, rebirths, etc. So Rivette carries on this tradition.

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Another link with the Surrealists is evident. The group's fascination with the myth of the labyrinth led them to name their most prestigious and influential review *Le Minotaure.* Finally, *L'Amour Fou* is also the title of one of Breton's best known works and, more broadly, describes the Surrealists' concept of passion. All the elements of Surrealism are here once again: the double, the lions of the Place Denfert-Rochereau which seem ready to spring to life at any moment (Freud's Uncanny), the mysterious stranger who crosses one's path in the middle of the night.

If the "city as protagonist" in a ritual of magic, death and mystery is one of the founding aspects of *Pont du Nord,* a second is film itself. Rivette's involvement outside of film-making proper is well-known, namely his editorship of *Cahiers du Cinéma* in the sixties. But other facets of Rivette's personality remain as cryptic as those of his characters. He is a man who after thirty years still attends films three times a day. It is then not surprising that *Pont du Nord* refers to film/cinema so directly, not only in specific references to other film texts, but more so in larger allusions to the film-making process and what it holds in mystery, adventure and magic. In this sense, the "house of fiction" of *Céline and Julie Go Boating* can be seen as the base upon which *Pont*

du Nord has been erected.

Allusions to other films abound. Marie sends a postcard to a friend in prison, Mathieu Doinel. A poster for *Kagemusha* is almost slashed by Baptiste. One of the Maxes who bears a striking resemblance to Anthony Perkins is found dead wearing a wig. Baptiste and Marie empty the briefcase at the Bir-Hakeim bridge, which is becoming an icon after such films as *The Conformist, Last Tango in Paris, The American Friend,* etc. These are the most obvious signposts (there are others) in a city which has come to signify film as much as Hollywood. Paris is a film city and here are its streets, its monuments.

But more generally, *Pont du Nord* is a quest much like that of young Jonathan Harker who also must cross a bridge before the phantoms come to meet him. He will be led, of course, to Nosferatu (embodied by Max Schreck). The bridge remains an element of transformation in German Romantic literature and in Rivette's film it appears once again to two weary travellers in search of their game's end.

Stylistically, the quest of *Pont du Nord* is all the more paradoxical because of its presentation in broad daylight—a paradox which Hitchcock had explored in the most famous sequence of *North by Northwest.* What evil lurks behind the bright facades shot by Rivette in the beautiful late winter light? The sense of the uncanny is often conveyed through everyday locations or objects. Marie's reluctance to enter a phone booth or a bakery make these places somehow evil. In another cinematic reference, Rivette cuts together numerous shots of the stone lions of the Place Denfert-Rochereau and the allusion to Eisenstein is unmistakable. As they did some sixty years earlier, the lions seem to spring to life, but no longer as a metaphor for popular anger and strength. Rather, it is the dark forces of the unconscious, of the unknown, which they allude to here.

Paris lends itself admirably to its representation as a labyrinth. The disorienting aspects of its landscape are exploited by Rivette who insists on exploring forgotten or unusual areas of the city along with the more famous monuments: the Quai de Bercy area and its decrepit warehouses or the no man's land of Parisian suburbs. Rivette's vision also shares points with that of two photographers whose work captured the mysteries of the city: Brassai and Atget. The most obvious connection made between Paris and its labyrinthine qualities is the superimposition of the "Jeu de l'Oie" game onto a map of the city. The twenty "arrondissements" become the selected boxes of a potentially deadly game, a search for a fairy-tale treasure.

To put the relationship of the two women within the context of Robin Wood's article, the alliance of the women seems to echo that of Céline and Julie but its ultimate conclusion is far bleaker. Marie wants nothing more than to unite with Julien in the assumed hope of forming a nuclear family (at least a perfect couple) and echoes more the heroines of French films of the thirties (Michele Morgan in *Quai des Brumes*) than a strong modern woman. Baptiste shows no true allegiance to Marie and seems to be there merely "for the ride." An elaboration of Wood's analysis would place Marie as a victim of the patriarchal order while Baptiste seems to join it at the film's conclusion (might she have been its accomplice all along?). The final view of *Pont du Nord* is thus essentially more pessimistic in terms of possible roads to action.

Marie's belief in a great love with Julien, the

HOW TO PLAY THE "JEU DE L'OIE"

This French game is derived from the Greeks, my edition of it tells me.

The players move their pieces around the board according to the throw of the dice. The object of the game is to reach the center of the board. But there are dangers. Box 19, the Hotel, forces the player to wait two turns. Box 31, the Well, demands you wait for rescue by another player as in boxes 42 and 52, the Labyrinth and the Jail. Box 58 is Death and forces the player to begin the game anew.

To play with Jacques Rivette, superimpose the pattern of the board on a map of your city and play with real space and people.

Good luck!

real at the end of her quest, will eventually be fatal for her. It is Baptiste's ability to "roll with the punches" which will perhaps save her, but at what cost? As one of the Maxes puts her through a karate exercise and tells her to fend off "imaginary enemies," the cross-hairs of a surveillance device (a rifle scope? a camera?) appear on the screen. "They" are now being watched by others, perhaps simply by us. That is, it may be that the answer to the riddle of the labyrinth—its last door—is simply the screen on which the actors' shadows appear. As for Marie, Baptiste, Julien, and even Max, they are inevitably and forever trapped in the web which Jacques Rivette has woven for them and which he calls *Pont du Nord.*

—FABRICE ZIOLKOWSKI

PONT DU NORD

Books

Torrence, Bruce T. *Hollywood: The First Hundred Years.* New York: New York Zoetrope, 1982. $15.95, paper. This volume was originally published by the Hollywood Chamber of Commerce, and its civic roots are evident—it treats Hollywood as a small town that acquired a famous and glamorous business, rather than a synonym for the American film industry. Filled with photographs of firestations and studios, churches and movie premieres, the book suggests Hollywood's blend of the ordinary and the fantastical. The book's design, however, hampers the reader's enjoyment of the photos. Too often, several pages separate the pictures from their explication in the text, so the reader must keep flipping through pages to recall a photo as it is described. Otherwise, the book offers a unique and enjoyable perspective on its fabled subject.

—VIVIAN KOENIG

STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT AND CIRCULATION, 10/1/83

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1. Sales through dealers and carriers, street vendors and counter sales	2078	2055
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C. Total paid circulation	6140	6097
D. Free distribution	122	124
E. Total distribution	6262	6221
F. Copies not distributed	1053	1017
G. Total	7315	7114

I certify that the statements made by me above are correct and complete.
Cynthia Deno, Journals Manager

Editor's Notebook, continued

kind of distribution pattern we associate with the stage drama, but not with a supposed mass medium. Moreover, the wave of ambitious documentaries which arrived in the past few years—many of them financed in part by public funds—seems to be over, a victim of Reagan-era parsimony toward the arts. Even the perennial experimental or "underground" film, which has traditionally survived on virtually nothing, seems to be in trouble: its audiences at colleges and museums have diminished and tastes have moved toward story films of a New Wave sort.

In Britain, where cinema attendance has plummetted and viodeocassette viewing has skyrocketed (thanks in part to a major cassette-piracy industry) a vivid sense of crisis exists, and new policy proposals are being made to sustain the domestic producing industry. In the US, it is tempting to hope that we are facing simply temporary signs of cultural reaction and stagnation. But it seems likely that fundamental structural changes are taking place which mean the seventh art will never be the same. It may become another "fabulous invalid"; it may die; it may be reborn. We invite comment on these issues and their ramifications.

real at the end of her quest, will eventually be fatal for her. It is Baptiste's ability to "roll with the punches" which will perhaps save her, but at what cost? As one of the Maxes puts her through a karate exercise and tells her to fend off "imaginary enemies," the cross-hairs of a surveillance device (a rifle scope? a camera?) appear on the screen. "They" are now being watched by others, perhaps simply by us. That is, it may be that the answer to the riddle of the labyrinth—its last door—is simply the screen on which the actors' shadows appear. As for Marie, Baptiste, Julien, and even Max, they are inevitably and forever trapped in the web which Jacques Rivette has woven for them and which he calls *Pont du Nord.*

—FABRICE ZIOLKOWSKI

PONT DU NORD

Books

Torrence, Bruce T. *Hollywood: The First Hundred Years.* New York: New York Zoetrope, 1982. $15.95, paper. This volume was originally published by the Hollywood Chamber of Commerce, and its civic roots are evident—it treats Hollywood as a small town that acquired a famous and glamorous business, rather than a synonym for the American film industry. Filled with photographs of firestations and studios, churches and movie premieres, the book suggests Hollywood's blend of the ordinary and the fantastical. The book's design, however, hampers the reader's enjoyment of the photos. Too often, several pages separate the pictures from their explication in the text, so the reader must keep flipping through pages to recall a photo as it is described. Otherwise, the book offers a unique and enjoyable perspective on its fabled subject.

—VIVIAN KOENIG

STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT AND CIRCULATION, 10/1/83

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Editor's Notebook, continued

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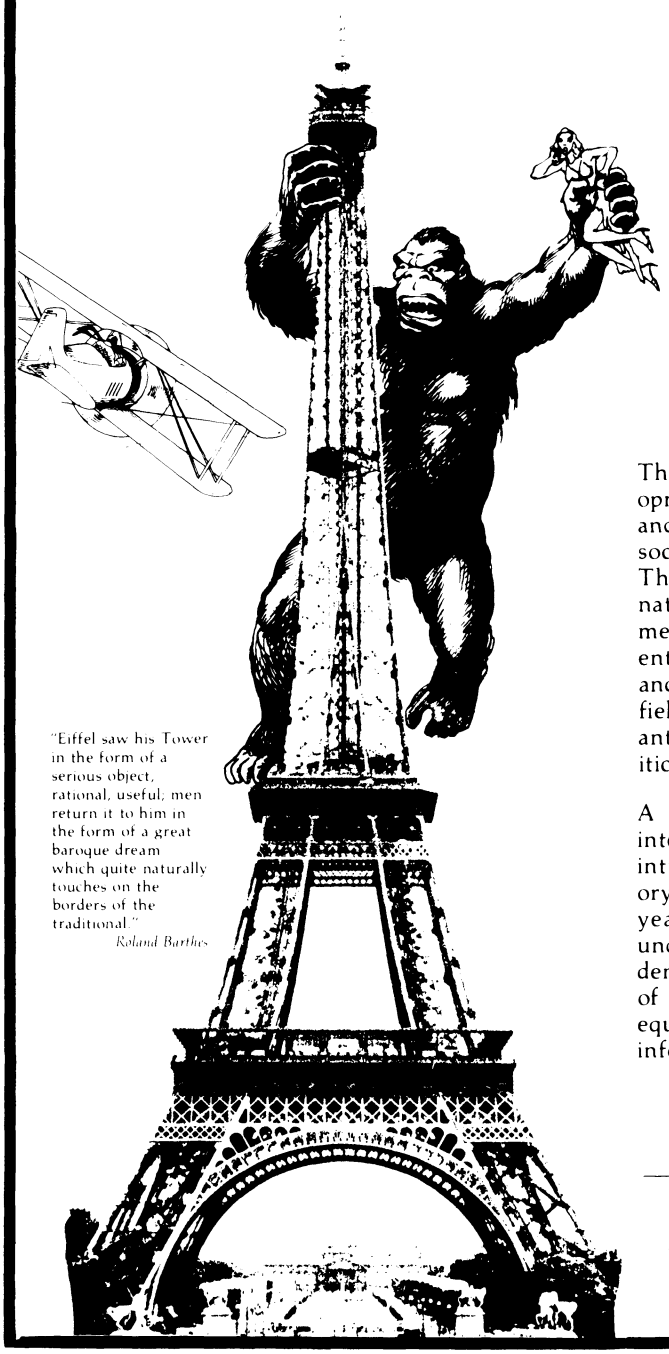

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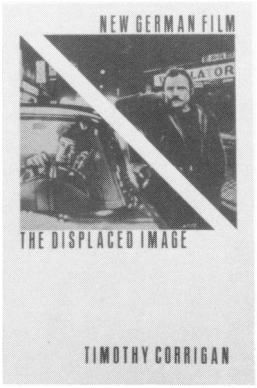

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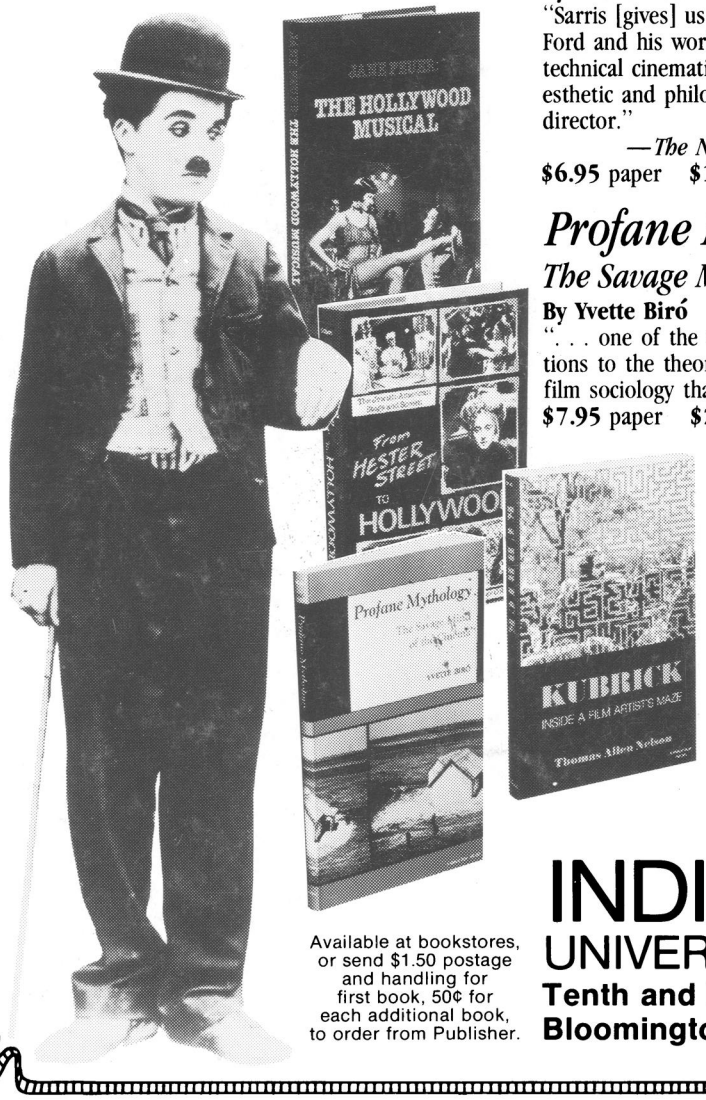

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